JUNE 25¢

TRIPLE WESTERN

THREE NOVELS IN ONE MAGAZINE

THIRSTY ACRES

by L. P. HOLMES

Firebrands

by W. C. TUTTLE

HELL and HOT LEAD

by NORMAN A. FOX

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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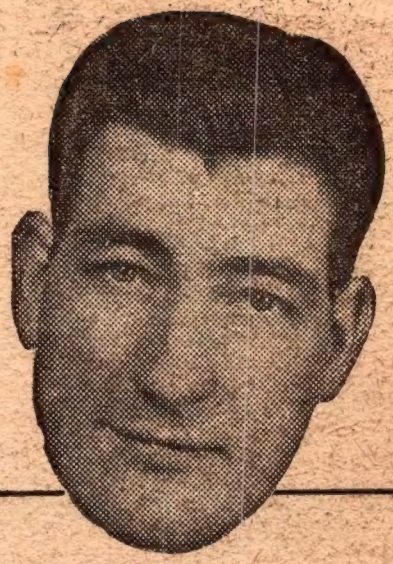

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THREE WESTERN CLASSIC NOVELS

TRIPLE WESTERN

VOL. 9, NO. 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION JUNE, 1951

THIRSTY ACRES

One brother led from strength, the other from weakness—but each of them played his hand according to the stern code of the West when a girl, a game young cowman and a gambler waged a three-cornered war for rangeland rule!

L. P. HOLMES 9

FIRE BRANDS

A boy, a dog, and that amiable pair of trouble-busters known as Sad Sontag and Swede Harrigan concoct a red-hot bowl of rustler stew when some tough, proddy gents make Oreana City the scene of their range-robbing operations!

W. C. TUTTLE 46

HELL AND HOT LEAD

All fighters aren't killers—as the Gospel Kid shows when he pounds the justice trail to avenge his sky-pilot brother while the town of Caprock is embroiled in a bitter struggle to push through the wending Western rails!

NORMAN A. FOX 84

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THE LUCK OF LAZY JIM

By John A. Thompson

BIG Jim Butler—his enemies called him Lazy Jim—was literally the father of Tonopah, Nevada. After he had his strike everybody respectfully referred to him as "Mr." Butler.

At the start easy-going Jim was a small hay rancher in Monitor Valley, near Belmont, then the county seat of Nye County, Nevada.

He had plenty of leisure to engage in his favorite pastime—prospecting—and he was a pretty astute prospector.

About 1900 a few local Nye County prospectors made a mineral discovery out in the desert at a place they optimistically named Southern Klondike. It sounded rich.

Jim decided to mosey over to the new camp. On the way he camped at Tonopah Springs, lost his burros in a dust storm that assayed a ton of sand per mile of wind and finally found them huddled up in the shelter of a low rock ledge. The outcrop he was crouched beside looked mineralized. He methodically chipped off a few samples, which, when he got to Southern Klondike, he handed to an assayer named Higgs.

"Run some tests on this stuff," he said good-naturedly, "and I'll give you a quarter interest in the claim."

Either Higgs wasn't in a good mood, or he had a hole in his head that day. He looked the samples over critically and threw them away.

"Not an ounce of gold in a carload," he pontificated.

Jim shrugged. On his way home he stopped at Tonopah Springs, hunted up the ledge and chipped off more samples of the rock he still believed was mineralized.

In Belmont, Butler turned the second batch of samples over to a young lawyer, Tasker L. Oddie, destined to become a Governor of Nevada, and a United States Senator.

"Get this rock assayed for me, Tasker," said Big Jim, "and I'll give you a quarter interest in the claim. I'm a little short of ready money right now."

So was Oddie. But a friend of his, in Austin, agreed to assay the samples for eight dollars. In lieu of cash Oddie promised his friend a half interest in his quarter interest in Butler's claim. The sample assayed six hundred dollars per ton in gold and silver—mostly gold.

Oddie rushed the good news to Jim Butler. Big Jim was busy haying.

"Thought she looked good," declared Jim. "But I got my hay to get in right now. Soon's I get the crop put up, I'll go out and stake that claim."

Oddie and the assayer chewed their fingernails for three months until Big Jim got his hay laid by. Then Jim set out for Tonopah, taking Mrs. Butler with him—just for the trip.

Butler found his ledge without any trouble, staked the Desert Queen for himself and his wife, and an adjoining claim, the Burro, for Oddie. Discovering another likely showing nearby, he located a third claim on it—the Mispay, which turned out richest of all.

In return for the loan of a wagon and team Butler cut a third man in for a share in his claims—Wilson Brougher, County Recorder for Nye County. The first ton of ore the partners shipped returned eight hundred dollars.

The Tonopah rush was on. Before the boom was over genial, honest Big Jim's discovery claims—held by a hay rancher, a young lawyer and a desert country county recorder—resulted directly in a record production of a hundred and fifty million dollars' worth of new gold and silver.

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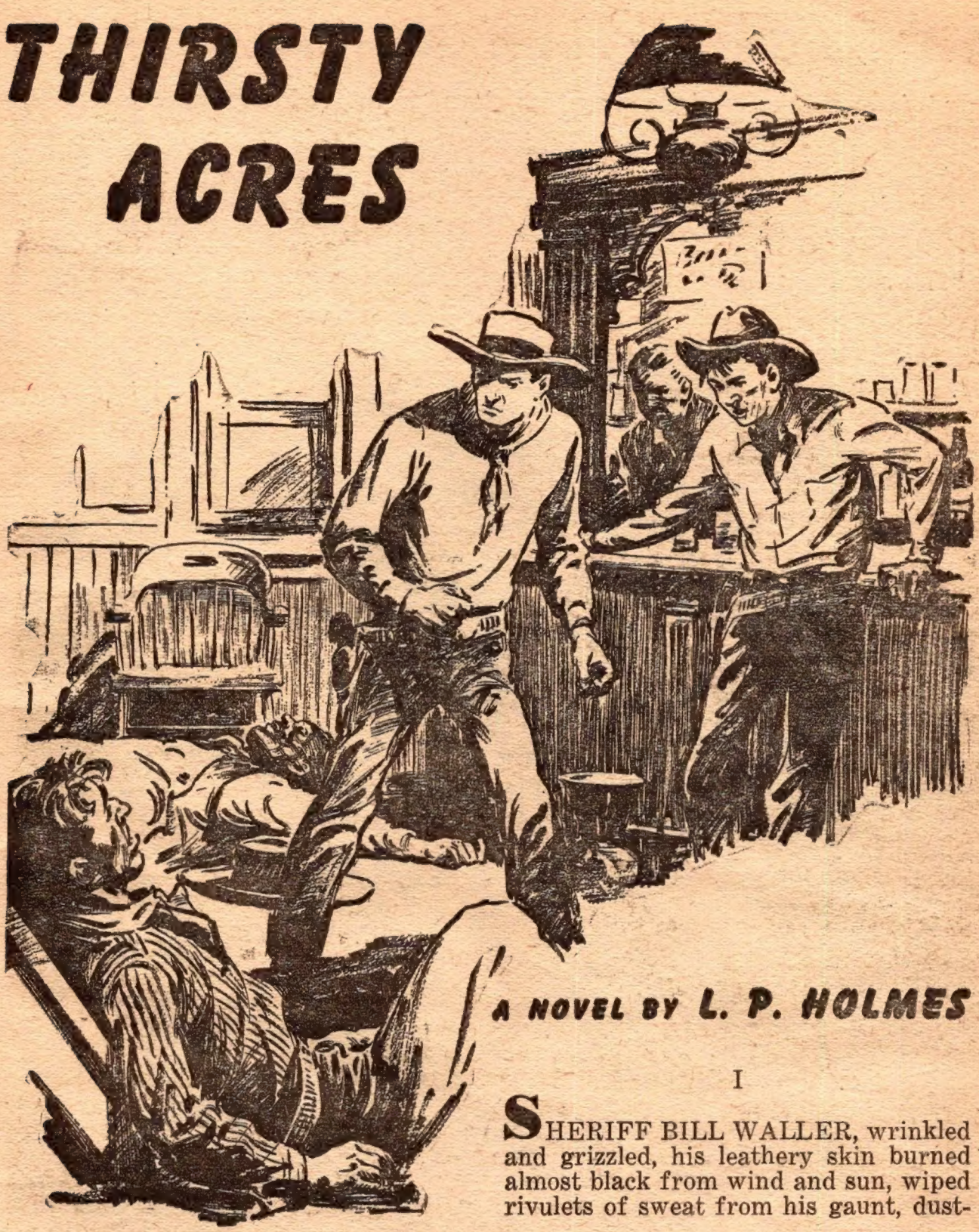
AND THEN THE FEDERAL AGENTS ARRIVED...

THIRSTY ACRES



A NOVEL BY L. P. HOLMES

I

SHERIFF BILL WALLER, wrinkled and grizzled, his leathery skin burned almost black from wind and sun, wiped rivulets of sweat from his gaunt, dust-

Copyright, 1938, by Warner Publications, Inc., originally published in First Sept. 1938 Ranch Romances

One brother led from strength, the other from weakness, but each played his hand according to the stern code of the West!

caked jaws and spoke in a regretful drawl. "You're his big brother, Clay. You got to head him off and straighten him out."

Clay Garrison paused in his restless pacing back and forth across the living room of the old Garrison ranchhouse.

"You say Buck was seen riding the lava pockets with Kirby and Ringo, Bill?"

Waller nodded. "It ain't the first report of that kind I've had on Buck. So far I've tried to laugh 'em off and just put it down as a few pranks by a restless kid, looking for excitement. But the time for laughing has just about

run out. Looking back, Clay, I ain't got a single regret for anything I ever had to do while carrying this star. But that record would be all shot if I ever had to buckle on a gun and go out after one of Old Buck Garrison's boys."

"You had a talk with him yet, Bill?"

The sheriff shook his head. "Me tackling him on that kind of a proposition would only make him bow his neck a little more, Clay. I figured I'd better let you work on your own brother first."

Clay Garrison stopped before a window and stared out with narrowed, burning eyes, hands tightly clenched.

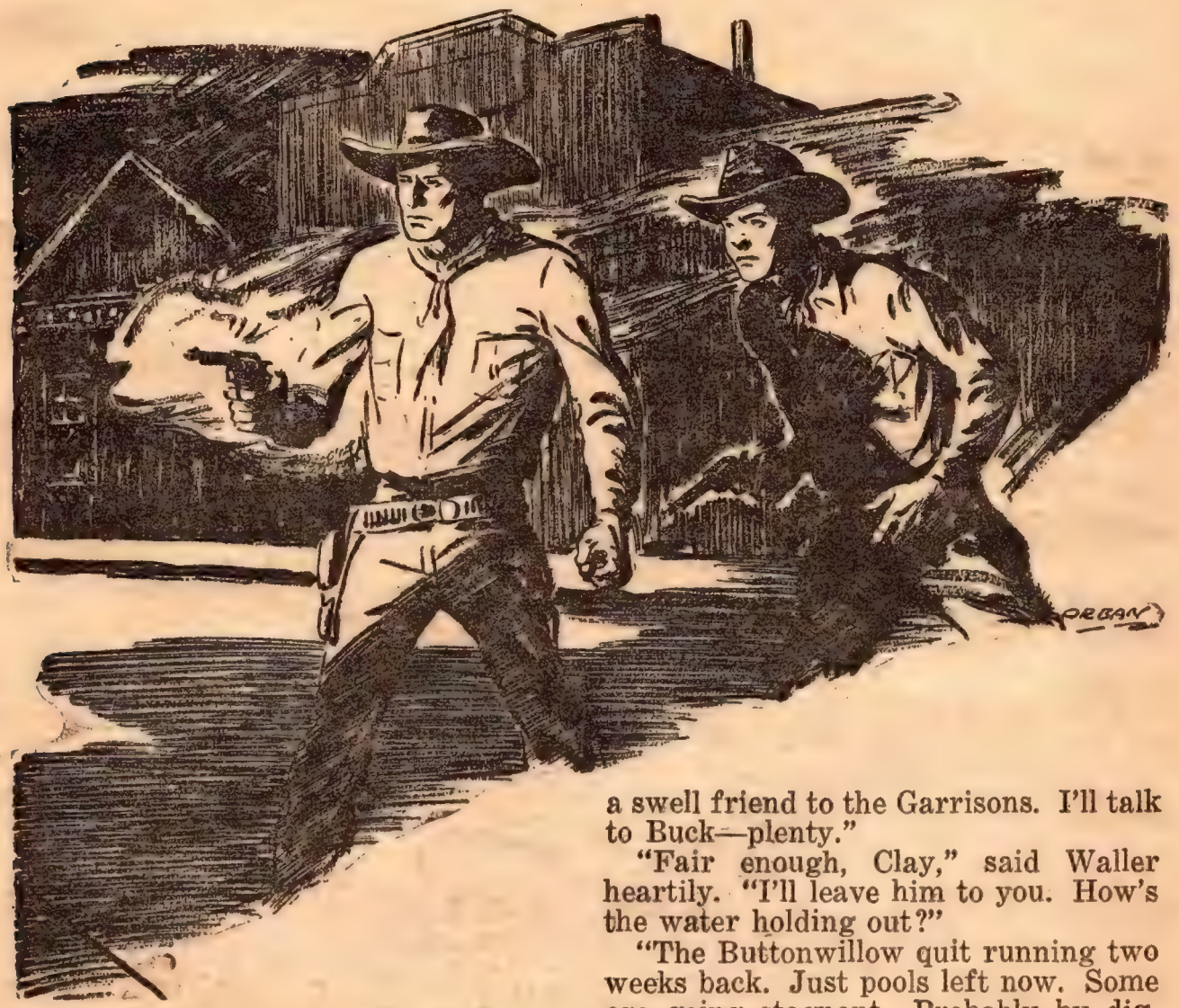
"It's this everlasting heat and dust," he said hoarsely. "If we don't get a rain pretty quick, I'm liable to do something violent myself. This cursed drought has got everybody fighting their heads. There's something about it that sets a man's teeth on edge, rubs his nerves raw, makes him savage and reckless, maybe, and anxious for excitement. But Buck's not really bad, Bill."

"If I thought he was, Clay, I wouldn't be out here. Instead I'd knock his ears down and give him what-for."

"Thanks, Bill. You always have been a swell friend to the Garrisons. I'll talk to Buck—plenty."

"Fair enough, Clay," said Waller heartily. "I'll leave him to you. How's the water holding out?"

"The Buttonwillow quit running two weeks back. Just pools left now. Some are going stagnant. Probably by digging we can make the water last another month or two. It's the range that's about gone. Cattle are growing



Clay Garrison fired and Shell Ringo began to reel

weaker everyday. . . . Bill, why can't we get some rain?"

Bill Waller walked to the door, stood there a moment.

"Back when you were a button, Clay," he finally said, "we had a spell like this, only worse. Lot of the ranchers folded up. But your dad and Rock Orde and Ben Cullop hung on. And finally that drought broke, just like this one will. And them who hung on came out of it bigger and stronger than ever. So tighten your belt, Clay, and stick with it."

Clay Garrison managed a twisted smile. "I'll stick until something breaks, one way or another."

"That's the talk. Well, I got to be traveling. *Adios.*"

CLAY walked out on the porch and watched Bill Waller jog away on his staid old roan. From where he stood, Clay could look over just about all of the Buttonwillow range. At the moment it was a torrid, heat-blasted land. To Clay's feverish eyes the corrals and feed sheds of the Sleeping G Ranch looked like shrunken skeletons. In the heat mirage the corral posts seemed to weave and float. And it seemed to Clay that he could almost hear the shakes on the sheds crackle and split in the sultry, blistering sun.

Farther out the range ran away in long, sweeping rolls of mirage-cursed distance. Ordinarily that range would have been an eye-cooling green or a rich tawniness. Now it had a sort of lifeless, gray look, like dead ashes.

Away out to the south, jutting into the hard, copper sky, lifted the gaunt shoulders of the Poncho Mountains. To the west spread the low, table-topped mass of black lava known as the Lost Hills. Way over east the range broke off into the yellow haze of the Dry Lakes Desert. And to the north was old Bear Foot Peak, lifting a scarred crown eight thousand feet into the air.

Up on top of Bear Foot, Clay mused, it would at least be cool. There would be still, rich-scented pine and fir thickets. And cold, sweet mountain water. Yet even the massive flanks of Bear Foot were being drained of water, for it was from this water that Buttonwillow River drew, and the river had quit running. The lone spot of greenery visible at the moment to Clay's moody eyes was the willow and alder thickets along the river. And even these were beginning to wilt and droop under the relentless fury of that burning red sun.

A movement by the river caught Clay's eyes, and he watched a slim figure on a pinto horse come angling up toward the ranchhouse. Momentarily the scowl on Clay's brow was smoothed away.

Clay Garrison never looked at Leigh Orde but what he was struck by one dominant note in her appearance. That note was a cool, immaculate purity. It lay in the silken gleam of her auburn hair, in the depths of her clear, gray eyes, in the lithe, swift grace of her. As she swung lightly up the porch steps, Clay smiled his welcome.

"Howdy, Leigh. Girl, how do you manage it? In all this cussed heat and dust, you look like you'd been playing in ice and cool winds."

Leigh Orde laughed, and even her laugh held a cool, tinkly note. "You've got a touch of sun, Clay. I'm roasting, half cooked. Show me to a chair. Whew! Isn't it awful?"

"Pretty bad." Clay nodded. "What does your dad think about it?"

The girl shrugged. "You know Dad. He's a regular bulldog. He says the rain will come one of these days, and then all will be right again. Dad should have been a great general. He could have whipped the world with an army of ten. Last night Ben Cullop was over, moaning about the drought. Dad looked him right in the eye and offered to buy him out, lock, stock and barrel. Old Ben nearly fell out of his chair. Then he began to grin. 'Rock,' he said, 'you got more innards than any man I ever knew. Reckon I'll stick with it, same as you.' "

The girl laughed again and Clay joined her. The line of her slim, brown throat, he thought, was lovely when she tipped back her head as she laughed.

They were silent a moment and a certain gravity settled upon them. The girl bit a red lip, then spoke a little hesitantly.

"Clay, I heard something yesterday.

I heard that Buck was hanging out pretty steadily with Spike Kirby and Shell Ringo."

"That's right," said Clay. "Bill Waller was just out to see me about it."

Leigh caught her breath. "Buck hasn't done anything to put Waller after him?"

"Not yet," said Clay grimly. "But if the kid keeps on running around with Kirby and Ringo, he's a cinch to get into trouble. That's what Waller wanted to see me about, to tell me to try and spur a little sense into my wild brother. I'm wondering if I can make a job of it."

There was a note of anxiety in his words which brought the girl's eyes to him. The ruggedness that had been a part of "Old Buck" Garrison was each day becoming more apparent in his elder son. Clay's face, like his big, six-foot body, was raw-boned and angular. Not a handsome man, Clay Garrison, but a strong, steadfast one. A certain bold hawkishness lay in the cut of his features, in the square line of his jaw, the grimly set lips, the jut of his nose and the steady, penetrating gleam in his deep eyes.

"If anyone can do it, Clay, you can," murmured Leigh. "And you've got to. For if Buck went bad, I'm afraid it would hurt me, pretty dreadfully."

THIS revealing statement, thought Clay, was indicative of Leigh Orde. Honest, straight from the shoulder. No simpering, no blushing, no beating around the bush. It hardly surprised him. For a long time he had suspected how things were between Leigh and Buck.

"I'll put him over the jumps, Leigh," Clay promised slowly. "I'm afraid Buck is pretty selfish. Natural, maybe. Dad babied him a lot and since Dad died I've sort of done the same. Buck hasn't got a bad strain in him. Just full of the devil and recklessness, natural for his age. But at heart he's a Garrison. I'd gamble my life on that. I reckon I'll be able to get him to steady down. And if I have to, I can always have a talk with Spike Kirby and Shell Ringo."

This last mild statement did not fool that girl. She knew what that talk would be like. It wouldn't be his own voice which would speak. It would be the voice of those two big, black guns which swung from Clay Garrison's lean, saddle-toughened flanks, whenever he left the ranch. A queer, inexplicable fear caught at her throat.

"Not that, Clay, not that!" she said breathlessly. "If Buck won't listen to you, send him over to see me. Maybe I can make him understand."

Clay knew what she meant. In spite of himself he winced.

"Reckon I'll be able to handle him," he said, his voice a little hoarse.

A big, sweating clay olla stood near the door, a tin dipper hanging on a nail beside it. Leigh went to it and drank thirstily. Then she crossed over to Clay, put a slim hand on one of his iron-hard fists.

"You'll do to take along, Clay Garrison," she said gravely.

"That," said Clay, "goes double, Leigh. Tell your dad that the Sleeping G will hang on until it rains, or until the whole world dries up and blows away."

After she had gone, Clay looked down at his big fist where her hand had rested, and a shadowed wistfulness crept into his eyes. Then he shook himself savagely, got his hat, buckled on his guns and went down to the cavvy corral, where he roped and saddled and headed northwest toward the town of Black Rock. . . .

It wasn't much of a town to begin with, Black Rock. Just a squalid, ugly little place, uninspiring and desolate. Just now it seemed to cower like a whipped dog under the blasting lash of a sun gone mad.

Clay Garrison left his pony in a scanty block of shade thrown by an overhang and clanked his way into the Humbug Saloon. Behind the bar "Dumpy" Kling, the bartender, sweated profusely and slapped a grimy bar towel half-heartedly at a couple of bluebottle flies. The only customer at the moment was swarthy, dapper "Frisco Dan" Drew, who owned the Humbug. He sat at a card table, dealing a hand of solitaire. He got to his feet as Clay entered.

"Hello, Clay," he said. "Any man

brave enough to ride through this sun deserves a drink. Name it. It's on the house."

Clay shook his head. "If you had some beer on ice, I might say yes. But whisky is dynamite, this kind of weather."

Drew laughed, and there was a queer slurring quality to both his laugh and voice.

"We got beer, but it would be a mighty tall lie to say it was cold. I don't blame you. Warm beer is slop, and you're right about the whisky. . . . Looking for somebody?"

"Yeah. Buck. He been around?"

"Not since last night. Anything wrong?"

"Nope. Just want to talk to him about something."

"He'll probably be in again this evening," said Drew.

The alarm clock behind the bar said four o'clock.

"Reckon I'll wait for him then," drawled Clay. "Too hot to ride home again now."

He crossed to one of the tables and sat down, shoving his hat to the back of his head and wiping his brow with a dusty shirt sleeve. Drew sat down opposite him.

"How about a few hands of crib? Help pass the time. Four-bits a game."

Clay nodded. They cut for deal and Clay won. Silence settled in except for the flutter of the cards and the low-voiced drone of the count.

AT HALF-PAST five a horse jangled to a stop outside and a man with a shriveled red face came in. Boley Stevens, who owned a small ranch over toward the Lost Hills. There was a whipped, hopeless look about Stevens. He came directly over to the table.

"That offer you made me last week good, Frisco?" he blurted.

Drew looked up. "What's the matter, Boley? Lose your nerve?"

"Call it what you want," said Stevens hoarsely. "Call it any blame thing. All I know is, I'm done. This blasted set-up has got me licked. Oh, I won't lie to you. That water-hole of mine, the one thing I've been gambling on all along—well, it's gone bad. Gone arsenic on me. I found twenty head of poisoned cows around it this morning. This cussed heat would poison anything. . . . Well, how about it?"

Frisco Drew's black eyes narrowed calculatingly. "I'll take the place, Stevens, but not at the first price I offered. That water-hole going bad takes a lot of value off the place."

"Any price you think is fair will suit me," said Stevens. "I've had enough. I fought a drought like this before and I know now that it ain't worth it. Life's too short. I've caved and I don't give a damn who knows it."

Drew stood up. "What do you think, Garrison?" He smiled thinly at Clay. "I'm a good enough business man to grab a proposition while it's hot."

"Fly to it." Clay shrugged.

II

DREW took Boley Stevens into a back room. Clay walked to the front door of the Humbug, stood looking up and down the street. The sun was low in the west, a fiery, crimson disc, about to set in a scorched sky. Long shadows, queerly black, ran out on the east side of various buildings.

Clay left the saloon and jingled his way down to Pete Flood's Emporium Store.

Flood was wrinkled, weazened, white-haired. As far back as Clay could remember, Pete Flood had run the Emporium. Clay sat on one end of the battered old counter.

"Pete," he said, "what do you know about poison water-holes?"

"I've seen a few of 'em," admitted Flood in his nasal twang. "Back when I was a cub about your age, I did some mule-skinnin'. Worked on a freightin' job across the Sarco Desert down in Pinolino County. I remember two water-holes, the most invitin' things you ever saw. Water looked clear and pure as you please. But one drink of it would kill a man or a mule inside of four hours. Arsenic. Then I've seen bad alkali holes. Water was wet, but thick as syrup. It wouldn't kill you right off, but if you drank enough of it, it shore would curdle your insides. . . . Sa-ay, why you interested?"

"These arsenic water-holes, do they stay that way, winter and summer, rain or shine?" asked Clay. "Or only turn that way during a hot spell?"

"They were arsenic, first, last and all the time," Flood asserted emphatically. "A arsenic spring never changes. It either is or it ain't. I heard folks claim different. I've heard 'em say a good water-hole can go arsenic durin' a dry spell. They're loco, that's what. A alkali hole can thin out to fairish water after a real storm, but that don't go for arsenic. How come? Your water going bad?"

"If this everlasting drought don't end pretty quick, I won't have any water-holes left, good or bad," parried Clay as he sauntered out. . . .

It wasn't until eight o'clock that night that young "Buck" Garrison showed up. He came into the Humbug alone, leaned against the bar and ordered whisky. Clay got up from his seat in a shadowed corner and walked over to him.

"Hello, Buck," Clay said easily. "Forget you had a bed out at the ranch?"

Buck colored under his heavy tan, tightened his lips and shrugged.

"You been on a still hunt for me?" he demanded defiantly.

"Maybe. You ain't showed up home for a couple of days, you know. I was getting a little worried."

"Forget it," snapped Buck. "I'm old enough to look out for myself."

Clay looked hard at his younger brother. A good-looking young hombre, was Buck. His features did not have the rugged, jutting hardness of Clay's, but were rounded, smoother. Like Clay's, his eyes were blue, but lacked that penetrating, silver clearness. And just now Buck's eyes were a trifle bloodshot, as though he had been drinking too much and sleeping too little.

"There's work to be done out at the ranch, Buck," Clay said slowly. "And the way this drought is hanging on, there'll be a lot more."

"Then why ain't you out there, instead of here, bothering me?" Buck rasped pettishly.

For the first time a glint of anger showed in Clay's eyes. "Dad left the ranch to both of us, kid, share and share alike. Your place is out there, working with me and the boys."

"To blazes with the ranch!" snarled Buck. "All it has ever meant is work, work, work—without a let-up. I'm looking for an easier way to earn a living. You can have my share of that damned lay-out. I'm through with it. . . . Hey, Dumpy, another shot of Bourbon."

"Forget it, Dumpy," ordered Clay. "He's had enough."

At that moment two other men came into the saloon—"Spike" Kirby and "Shell" Ringo. Neither of the Garrison boys noticed the arrivals, for Buck was staring angrily at Clay, who met the look unwaveringly. Buck put his hands on his hips and squared himself before Clay.

"Let me get this right," he rapped. "You trying to tell me whether I can buy a drink or not?"

"You've had more than is good for you now," Clay answered grimly. "So—that's all for tonight. You and me are going home. Come on."

CLAY put out a hand, but Buck struck it aside.

"I've had enough of this foolishness!" he cried angrily. "Here's something to chaw over. I'm free, white and twenty-one. I'll drink when I please, where I please, and do as I damn please."

"You're half-drunk or you wouldn't be acting this way," growled Clay. "You're going home with me."

Down the bar a harsh laugh sounded, then a mocking voice.

"Baby can't have the bottle he wants. Bucky, why don't you grow up and tell that big lunk of a brother of yours where to head in at?"

Buck whirled, saw that it was Shell Ringo who had spoken. Scarlet blood flamed in Buck's face.

"I been trying to tell him that, Shell. But he's too thick-headed to get the point, I reckon."

"Come on over and have a drink with Spike and me," Ringo invited. "We want company."

Buck walked over and lined up with them.

"Make it a tall one, Dumpy," he called. "Bourbon."

Clay Garrison stood stock-still, his

face in no way indicating his thoughts. Both Kirby and Ringo were watching Clay, grinning mockingly.

Kirby was a compactly built rider, with the bent elbows and hooked wrists that told of powerful arms and shoulders. He had a hatchet face, with pale little eyes. Shell Ringo was tall and lanky, with a twisted mouth and a crooked nose. At one time Ringo had been the cheapest kind of a tinhorn—a shell game man. From that he had drifted into a more dangerous game. And the deftness of hand which had enabled him to handle the shells now made him highly dangerous with a gun.

The mockery of the grins Kirby and Ringo were showing built up a cold, slow fury in Clay Garrison. In even, purposeful strides he walked over to them. Kirby edged a little way out from the bar.

"You weren't thinking of getting rough, were you, Garrison?" he said softly.

"Depends," was Clay's harsh reply. "I'll let you figure that out."

Then he hit Kirby with a flinty right fist that whistled as it traveled in a short, lifting arc. It caught Kirby full on the side of his narrow jaw, lifting him almost off his feet. Kirby's knees sagged and he fell into a left fist that nearly tore his head off. When Kirby hit the floor he was as cold as a wedge.

Shell Ringo, startled, cursed, and tried to step back, one hand whipping down toward a holstered gun. But Ringo had forgotten the bar. Halfway through that backward step he banged into the bar and bounced away, staggering and off-balance. Clay smiled thinly and knocked Ringo halfway across the room with a smashing punch that was as lethal as a battle-ax. Ringo's gangling length brought up, sprawling, across a card table, which overturned with a crash. And Shell Ringo lay like a dead man.

A cowboy farther along the bar and well past his liquor limit, laughed foolishly.

"Somebody"—he hiccoughed—"somebody just got hit—hard."

"You'd better keep out of this, pard," Clay said not unkindly.

The cowboy hiccoughed again. "My sentiments," he said and moved further away.

Clay, after a quick glance at Kirby and Ringo, centered his blazing eyes on Buck.

"Come on, kid," he said grimly. "Me and you are going home."

Buck Garrison looked at the men on the floor and then, without a word, walked out into the hot night, Clay stalking at his heels.

From the far end of the bar, Frisco Drew had watched the whole affair with narrowed, expressionless eyes. Now his lips curled slightly as he glanced at Kirby and Ringo.

"Straighten 'em out, Dumpy," he told the bartender. "I'll take over the trade. . . ."

WORK at the Sleeping G for the present meant spreading the last remnants of grass as far as possible. Clay Garrison sought out the spots of fast disappearing forage and with the help of his three punchers and the sulky, disgruntled Buck, drifted one bunch of ribby cattle after another slowly across these precious areas.

Clay had taken his cue from what "Rock" Orde had told him.

"It's hell on the stock," Orde had said. "But there is only one way to fight a drought. Keep your cattle moving. Don't let 'em hang around all the water, or around all the grass that is left. They'll go down and die on you, shore. Nature of the brutes. So you keep 'em moving, Clay. It'll be tough on you and your crew, and on the cattle, but it is the only answer. I fought a worse drought than this that way, and it worked. It'll work again."

And so, with "Bib" Osborne, Luke Pierce and Charley Curtis, the Sleeping G crew, Clay endured the blasting punishment of the savage sun stoically, and kept the gaunt, protesting cattle on the move. Buck was silent and moody, cursing now and then to himself. Once he ventured an aside to Charley Curtis.

"Damned if I can see any sense to this sort of thing. The cattle are weak enough without keeping them always on the move. The whole herd will fall down and die any minute. This drought is going to clean the Buttonwillow

range, and the quicker a lot of fools realize it, the better for everybody concerned."

Charley Curtis was a wrinkled old puncher, lean and tough and wiry as seasoned rawhide. He never talked a great deal, but when he spoke, it was generally right to the point. Now he looked at Buck with unreadable eyes, cleared his leathery jaws of one cud of tobacco and gnawed off a fresh chunk.

"A quitter is always easy to lick," he twanged. "Takes a man to lick a tough set-up. Clay's all man. This outfit will come out all right."

Then he spun his horse and rode away, leaving Buck with burning face. The inference in the old puncher's words was unmistakable.

About mid-morning Sheriff Bill Waller came jogging up. He rode straight up to Clay and stuck out his hand.

"Last night you did a swell job, Clay," he said. "Shake."

Clay smiled grimly. "Ride clear out here just to tell me that, Bill?"

"Mainly," said Bill. He nodded toward Buck. "How's he taking it?"

"A little sullen and sulky, but I think he'll shake out of it."

The sheriff nodded. "Hear about Boley Stevens' best water-hole going arsenic, Clay?"

"Yeah. I was in the Humbug when he came in and offered to sell to Drew. Drew bought, didn't he?"

"So I understand. Funny about that water-hole."

"Yeah, funny."

Waller gnawed his lip. "So blame funny," he murmured, "that I'm wonderin' about it. I'm headin' out that way now to have a look at it." Then he grinned. "Nice weather we're having."

"Oh, fine," answered Clay, grinning in return.

It was easier, thought Clay, to keep after a tough job when you'd had a little talk with a man like Bill Waller. Tough and seasoned and indomitable, that was the sheriff. A man who could grin when the going was toughest. Clay went back to his toil in a more cheerful frame of mind.

The day wore through and ended finally. The blazing sun went down, leaving the range cloaked with a hot, turgid twilight haze. The Sleeping G outfit rode back to headquarters and ate a silent supper. When the punchers returned to the bunkhouse, Buck Garrison began a restless pacing to and fro, Clay watching him guardedly. Clay seemed to arrive at a sudden decision.

"Kinda restless myself," he drawled carelessly. "What say we jog over to Rock Orde's R O Up and Down and see how things are there, kid?"

"Not interested," snapped Buck shortly.

Clay shrugged. "We're going, just the same. Come on."

"Be damned if we are!" yelled Buck in sudden fury. "I'm sick of being led around by the nose like I was a baby. You hear me, I'm sick of it! You keep away from me. I'm going where I please, when I please. I'll pick my own friends. I'm headin' for town—now!"

"You're not," growled Clay harshly. "If I've got to lick the devil out of you to make you show some sense, then I reckon I've got to. Here's where you get it!"

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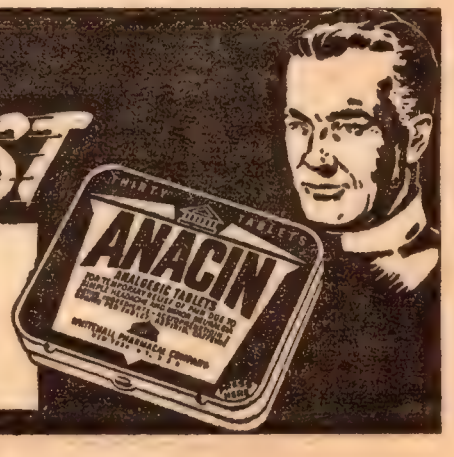

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III

CLAY GARRISON started for his brother Buck, but halted abruptly, for Buck had shot a hand inside his shirt and jerked it out again. In it was a gun and the gun bore steadily on Clay's belt buckle.

"You see?" Buck said thickly. "Brother or no brother, you touch me and you get it!"

Clay seemed to tower. "You'd throw a gun on me, your brother?" he said hoarsely. "All right, I'm done. Go on, get out. Go to hell in your own way. But when they tighten a noose around your neck, don't put up a squawl for me. I never did you a dirty trick in my life, yet you pull a gun on me."

There was stark tragedy in Clay's voice that seemed to strike through the defiance of his younger brother. The gun wavered slightly.

And then, echoing in from the outer darkness came the racing, rapid pound of approaching hoofs. There was something ominous and threatening in the very speed of that approaching rider. Clay and his brother reacted much the same. Clay stared at the open door, waiting. Buck put the gun from sight and, had Clay been watching him, he would have seen a slow pallor building up under the tan of face and throat.

Spurs clashed as that rider struck the ground, there was the click of boot heels across the porch, and then a sweating, grim-faced figure stepped through the open door. "Turk" Conroy, one of Rock Orde's riders.

"Clay! Thank Gawd you're here. Hell's to pay!"

"What is it, Turk?"

"Rock Orde. He's been shot!"

"Shot! Killed, you mean?"

Conroy shook his head. "Not dead yet. But he's bad, awful bad. Shot through the body."

"Who did it—and why?"

"Don't know. Nobody knows. Happened somewhere out on the range, when he was alone. He came in on his own bronc, layin' over the horn like a dead man. I'm tellin' you that iron-jawed old catamount rode his own horse home, and was still in the saddle when he was plumb unconscious! Miss Leigh, she sent me after you."

Despite his own trouble with Buck, despite the ominous import of Rock Orde's shooting, something swift and warm shot through Clay Garrison. He knew how Leigh Orde adored her bluff, bulldog father, knew of the rare companionship between father and daughter. He knew what a crushing blow this would be to Leigh, and she, in her grief and shock, had asked—for him!

Clay reached for his hat and guns. "Be right with you, Turk. Somebody gone for Doc Peets?"

"Yeah, Slim Bucknell."

Clay seemed to have forgotten all about Buck. He walked past him to the door as though Buck did not exist. And Buck stood there, staring out through the open door, not moving until he heard the pound of hoofs fading into the night. Then he went out himself, caught and saddled and headed for town. . . .

In the R O Up and Down ranchhouse, to which he had come on the run, Doc Peets hunched his shoulders and spread his hands, palms upward.

"I'd say the chances are about seventy-thirty," he said, "with Rock on the wrong end. His age is against him, yet he's such a rough, tough old juniper you can't write him off. If he makes it through the night, his chances are better. I'm staying right with him."

Clay Garrison, Bill Waller, Ben Cullop, a neighbor rancher, and Jerry Hyatt, the R O Up and Down foreman, tiptoed from the living room of the ranch-house and stood in a sober group under the stars, spinning cigarettes.

"You went over Rock's guns, didn't you, Bill?" asked Clay.

"Yeah." Sheriff Waller nodded. "They were clean and hadn't been shot. Whoever got Rock, got him before he could shoot back—the damned lobos! I wish I knew where to begin to look."

"You could back-track Rock's horse, maybe," suggested Cullop hopefully.

"I aim to try, come daylight," growled Waller. "But it's a thin chance. You got any idea, Jerry, where Rock might have been riding?"

The foreman shook his head. "Ever since this drought has been going on, Rock's done a lot of riding. He's been

all over the range, watching the cattle, measuring grass and water. He might have been in any of a dozen places when the shootin' took place."

SOMEBODY came shuffling through the darkness. It was "Westy" Fall, the ranch cook.

"Clay," he said, "Miss Leigh wants to see you."

She was waiting for him on the porch, slim and straight. Her face was a pale, oval gleam. Clay could sense her banked grief and worry.

"Clay," she said, her voice tight but steady, "I guess you're wondering why I sent for you. But some time ago Dad and I were talking about you, and Dad said that if I ever needed help, or if anything ever happened to him and I needed someone to lean on, I was to send for you. Dad's own words were: 'Clay Garrison is the strongest man along the Buttonwillow River.' And—and Clay, I need someone to lean on, now."

Her voice quivered and broke and she tottered toward him blindly, her hands going out in a queer, pitiful little gesture. Tears that she had held back now burst forth. Clay put a big arm about her and she clung to him, her face buried against his brawny shoulder.

Clay did not try and fool himself. She had come to him because she needed his strength, his dependability, much as a sister might have come to a brother.

He said nothing, wise enough to let her have her burst of grief over with. He made no attempt to speak until the violence of her sobs definitely lessened and the shaking of her slim shoulders stilled.

"I reckon you can always depend on me, Leigh," he said then, a little huskily.

"But if—if he dies, what will I do—what will I do?" she wailed softly.

Clay patted her shoulder. "He's not going to die. Men like Rock Orde don't kill that easy. Keep your chin up. Your dad would want you to."

She drew away from him, dabbing at her eyes. "I will," she promised tremulously. "But who, Clay, who would have had reason to do that to Dad?"

Clay shook his head. "Who knows? This drought, this everlasting heat and sun, it unbalances men. It might drive some completely loco. No telling what they might do. Come daylight and Bill Waller and I are going to do a little investigating."

She was still for a time. Then a new thought came to her.

"Buck—was he home when Turk brought you the message?"

"Yeah," said Clay grimly. "He was there."

"He didn't offer to come over with you?"

"No, Leigh, he didn't. But I reckon that was because he was plenty mad at me. I jerked him up pretty hard the other night and he hasn't got over it yet. But he'll come around. Now, you better go and try and get some rest."

She turned wearily away, and Clay sought out the sheriff. They rode off together.

In the gray dawn, they made an attempt to back-track Rock Orde's horse, but with no success. Restless cattle, cursed with hunger and thirst, had wiped out the sign during the night.

So they rode back to the ranch, where they learned that Rock Orde was doing as well as could be expected. Then Waller went back to town and Clay to the Sleeping G.

Buck was not around and the punchers were out with the cattle. Clay realized suddenly that he had had no breakfast, so went into the house to fix up a bite. A pair of saddle-bags lay on the floor near the door and he absently boosted them out of the way. As they struck in a corner a little thread of white powder trickled from one of them.

Clay stared. Those saddle-bags were Buck's—his initials burned into the yoke strap. Clay went over, dropped on one knee and opened the bags. Both were heavily dusted on the inside with that fine, white powder.

Clay went suddenly haggard. Automatically he got a smear of that powder on a fingertip, tasted it, then spat. He stood up slowly. He hovered in momentary indecision. Then his jaw tightened and his eyes took on the flare of savage, furious anger. He forgot all about eating. He caught up the saddle-

bags, went out to his horse and headed for town. . . .

CLAY reined in in front of Sheriff Waller's office, still harsh of face, burning of eye. Bill was in his office and he looked up in amazement as Clay stalked in and slammed the saddle-bags down on the table.

"What the—" began Waller.

"Take a look at those, Bill," gritted Clay. "See if you recognize 'em."

"They're Buck's."

"Right. Look inside 'em and taste what you find."

Waller followed directions, started from his chair to stare at Clay.

"My Gawd!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "That's arsenic!"

"That's right," said Clay, his shoulders sagging in a sudden, despondent weariness. "And Boley Stevens' best water-hole turned arsenic, plumb mysterious."

Bill Waller sank slowly back into his chair. "Clay," he said harshly, "you could have hidden those bags, or destroyed them and said nothing."

"And doublecross as square a man as ever drew breath, which is you?" Clay shook his head slowly. "I'm not so straight-laced that I wouldn't do a lot of things for Buck's sake, but there's a limit to what I can do—and he can do. This is it."

Bill Waller filled a battered old pipe, lighted it and puffed furiously.

"The cussed young fool!" he burst out suddenly. "He ought to be horsewhipped."

Clay beat a clenched fist into his open palm. "I can't believe he did it. I can't believe Buck would poison a rancher's water-hole at a time when water means so much."

"You brough in the evidence yourself," Waller said drily. "Knowing your dad and knowing you, Clay, it's hard to believe that Buck would do a thing of that sort. Yet there it is." He tapped the saddle-bags with a knotty forefinger.

Clay scowled. "There was some purpose in fighting this drought—up till now. Now, what's the use?"

"Listen," said Waller. "For your sake, Clay, I'm going to stretch a point. We'll keep this to ourselves for a while, until we have a talk with Buck. Maybe he can explain this, though I don't know how. If he can't, there's only one out for me."

"I know." Clay nodded. "And I won't hold it against you, Bill."

Waller put the bags in a corner closet, locked it, and picking up his hat, jammed it on his head.

"Let's go find Buck," he said. "There's one thing we don't want to forget, Clay. If Buck did poison that water-hole, it was at the suggestion or order of somebody else, for he'd have no reason under the sun for doin' it, otherwise. So, we have a water-hole poisoned. Yesterday some time, Rock Orde was mysteriously shot and wounded seriously. Maybe it just happened that way, but maybe it goes a whole lot deeper than that. Maybe there's something ugly brewin' on this sun-blasted range and we're just stumblin' onto the first effects of it. We play this close to our vests."

They left the office together, headed for Pete Flood's Emporium as their first stop in their search for Buck Garrison. Flood always kept an eye on what was happening in town. And he had seen Buck.

"He's down in the loft of the livery barn, sleeping it off," old Pete told them. "He went on a roarin' drunk last night and Jigger Dugan took him down there and threw a blanket over him. Clay, you better put a plumb strong check-rein on that brother of yours, or he'll wind up in a mighty tough spot."

Clay didn't answer, but stalked out of the Emporium and down to the livery barn, Bill Waller striding beside him. "Jigger" Dugan, the liveryman, a little, bright-eyed Irishman, was soaping a set of harness. He nodded toward a little cubby-hole room in one corner of the stable.

"He's in on my bunk, wit' a head on him like a ball of fire," said Jigger. "I made him douse his head in the watherin' trough and thin I gave him a wee snort of likker. But he's one sick bhoy right now, I'm after tellin' ye."

Still fingering the harness, he eyed them morosely.

IV

BUCK GARRISON was not a pretty sight, stretched out on Jigger Dugan's bunk. His hair was tousled and full of bits of straw. His eyes were bloodshot, his ordinarily clean-cut young face bloated from whisky, and grimy with dirt and whiskers. He stared sullenly up at Clay and Bill Waller, and said nothing.

"Feelin' kinda low, eh, Buck?" said the sheriff cheerfully.

Buck grunted, ran a hand over his brow. Waller laughed.

"Yeah, I know. Nothing like it for pure misery. Well, get hold of yourself. You're coming over to my office for a little talk. . . . Come on, I'll give you a hand."

"Go 'way," mumbled Buck. "Leave me alone. I'm sick of being talked to."

"Just the same, you're going to take it." Then Waller's voice cracked like a whip. "Get up off that bunk and come along!"

Buck licked harsh, feverish lips, got slowly and unsteadily to his feet. He wobbled a trifle and Clay took him by the arm. "All right, kid," he said gently. "I'll help you."

Slowly they went up the street and into Waller's office. The sheriff closed and locked the door. Buck sank into a chair, holding his head in his hands, staring at the floor. Waller produced a bottle.

"Another good drag at the hair of the dog will help a lot," he said.

Buck took the drag, coughed, then straigtened slightly.

"What's the idea?" he mumbled. "Some more preachin'?"

"Maybe," said Waller curtly. "Let's call it cold turkey. Buck, who got you to poison Boley Stevens' water-hole?"

For a minute Buck Garrison sat like a man turned to stone. Then: "Who says I poisoned that water-hole?"

Without a word Waller went to the closet, got the saddlebags and tossed them on the table.

"Yours?" he snapped.

The whisky-bloated young face seemed to tighten, go slowly pale.

"Yeah," blurted Buck hoarsely. "Mine."

"They're still smeared with arsenic powder," said the sheriff, indicating the white powder.

"I carried arsenic in them," admitted Buck slowly. "But I didn't poison that water-hole."

"You know who did?"

"Yeah."

"Who?"

Buck shook his head. "Not sayin'."

"You mean you won't say?"

"That's right. I won't."

There was a long moment of silence. Buck stirred restlessly in his chair, staring at the saddle-bags. A sudden thought seemed to strike him. He straightened with a jerk.

"How'd you get hold of those bags?" he demanded of Waller.

CLAY spoke quietly. "I brought them in from the ranch."

"You did? You found 'em and brought 'em to Waller? You brought evidence to a sheriff—evidence against me—your own brother! A regular Holy Joe, eh? Of all the snide hypocrites! Turn against your own flesh and blood. Why, you damned—"

Buck's furious tirade broke off abruptly. Bill Waller had him by the shoulder, yanking him upright, then slamming him across the room until his shoulders banged against an inner wall. And then the sheriff pressed in on him, his blazing eyes cutting into the younger man.

"Shut up!" Waller roared. "Not another word out of you, you snivelin' whelp. For a red cent I'd knock the everlastin' tar out of you. Yeah, Clay brought those bags to me because he's a man. But you wouldn't understand that. You don't know what a man is, because you're so far from being one yourself. You don't know what honesty means, or honor or truth or courage or anything else. You'd turn down the faith and trust of a brother who's been plenty good to you to run around with skunks like Spike Kirby and Shell Ringo. You'd dirty up the name of as fine a man as ever breathed—your own father—and then yelp like a yellow dog when you got caught. Yeah, for less than a cent I'd whale you within an inch of your life."

BILL WALLER was shaking with wrath. His keen eyes blazed, his jaw jutted out like the prow of a battleship. One clenched fist was waving up and down under Buck Garrison's nose.

"Yeah," he went on, "you're a weak, snivelin' whelp who don't deserve the Garrison name. I could put you behind bars. I could cinch you with a case that would send you over the road for twenty years. I could make you crawl—plenty. But for the memory of your father and for the sake of a brother who is worth twenty of you, I'm goin' to play fast and loose with my oath of office.

"I'm paroling you over to Clay. You're to go home and work—hard. You're not to take a drink or come near town without Clay's permission. You're not to have a blasted thing to do with Kirby or Ringo. In other words, you're to start in being decent. And if you break one little part of that parole then it's you for a long stretch. I'm hangin' on to those saddlebags. I got a club to swing over your worthless head and I'm goin' to swing it. Now you've heard somethin' and you better believe I mean every word of it."

Bill Waller turned away, walked across the room and stood with his back to Buck Garrison. The room grew still. Buck stared at the floor. Under the flailing broadside of the sheriff's wrath, he seemed to shrivel. And the vast contempt in the sheriff's gesture of turning his back on him sent Buck's face to a flaming, shamed crimson.

Then Bill Waller whirled on him again. "Go clean yourself up, get some breakfast and be back here with your horse, ready to ride in not over an hour. Get!"

Buck Garrison shuffled to the door, hang-dog and shamed. He threw a single furtive glance at Clay, and to his immense surprise, Clay was smiling at him.

"I'll be waiting for you, kid," he said gravely.

Buck gulped and went out. Waller flashed a quick look at Clay. "Sore?" he asked curtly.

Clay shook his head. "Of course not. I'm eternally grateful, Bill. You're overlooking those saddle-bags."

"I'm not overlookin' 'em," cut in the sheriff. "If Buck breaks his parole, it will be just too bad for him. But I'm playin' a little gamble, Clay. I still thing Buck has good stuff in him, if we can only stir it up. I'm gambling that maybe, now that I've ripped the hide off him, his conscience will get to workin'. He'll start thinkin', realize that he's off on the wrong foot and one of these days come through without any proddin' with all he knows about this arsenic business. Then I'll be able to clamp down on who is really responsible. Somehow, when he said he didn't poison that water-hole, I believed him. But he carried that arsenic for somebody else, and what I want to do is find out who that somebody is."

Clay nodded. "I sort of figured you were up to something like that, Bill. I'll help all I can."

Before the hour of grace was up Buck Garrison was back at the sheriff's office with his horse. He looked considerably better. He'd had a good wash. It seemed to Clay that there was just a trifle more tilt to Buck's jaw than usual.

They rode out to the ranch in silence all the way. As soon as they arrived Buck changed to a fresh bronc.

"Where you going?" Clay asked quietly.

"Out to help the boys with the cattle."

Clay's heart warmed. "No need of rushing it, kid. You look pretty seedy. You better go lay down and get some sleep. Tomorrow morning you can dig in."

Buck shook his head. "Now's the time to start," he said gruffly.

"All right," said Clay. "We'll go out together."

The long, dusty hours in that feral sun did things to Buck. At first it nearly crucified him, with his aching head. But it also burned the whisky out of him, and by sundown the puffiness had left his face and a clearer light had come into his eyes.

When supper was over with, Clay turned to Buck.

"I'm going up to the Orde place. Want to find out how Rock is making it. I think Leigh would appreciate it if

you came along, kid."

"Sure," said Buck. "Let's go."

WHEN they reached the R O UP and Down they found Jerry Hyatt and Turk Conroy sitting on the ranchhouse steps, smoking. Their greeting was cordial.

"Rock's better?" Clay guessed.

"Shore is!" enthused Turk. "Never was enough lead mined to kill that old catamount. Doc Peets says he's amazed, but tickled pink."

"That," Clay said slowly, "is plumb great."

There was the click of a heel and the swish of movement and a slim figure stood on the porch. Clay heard Leigh's quick exclamation of delight.

"Buck!" she said softly, adding offhandedly, "Hello, Clay."

Buck went up the steps, and he and Leigh moved off around the porch. Clay stared out into the night, glad that the dark hid the wistfulness and pain in his eyes.

"Heard about Tinsley and Stinchfield, Clay?" asked Jerry Hyatt.

"No. What about 'em?"

"They sold out."

"Sold out! Both of 'em?"

"Yep, both of 'em. And I'll bet you can't guess who to."

"Not an idea," admitted Clay.

"Drew. Frisco Dan Drew. He bought 'em out, lock, stock and barrel. This drought licked 'em."

"I'll be damned," said Clay slowly. "Tinsley—he don't surprise me. He always was a sort of weak one, always lookin' on the darkest side. But Bob Stinchfield—I always figured Bob as being too salty to quit under punishment."

"I've heard that Bob's been buckin' the tiger pretty heavy at the Humbug lately, and not winnin'," said Turk Conroy. "Maybe he got to owing Drew so much money he had to sell to get from under. I've known more'n one man who was stout in every other way to be the weakest kind of sucker over a poker table. I am myself, for that matter." And Turk laughed cheerfully.

Clay thoughtfully built a smoke. "If Drew keeps on buyin' he's going to own most of this Buttonwillow range pretty quick," he said gravely. "That makes three ranches he's picked up in less than a week. Boley Stevens', Tinsley's and Stinchfield's. He's takin' a long chance. If this drought don't bust right soon, it will bust him."

"Drew is a gambler," Jerry Hyatt said slowly. "I reckon he's got that figured out. On the other hand, if he can hang on now till rain does come, he'll cash in heavy. Good times hit this range again and he'll have an empire with those three ranches."

Another horse came jogging up through the darkness. It carried Ben Cullop, Orde's neighbor and one of the bigger ranchers in the vicinity.

"How's Rock makin' it?" he asked.

"Fine," answered Hyatt. "Doc Peets is real pleased."

Cullop found a place on the steps. "Any line yet on who shot him?"

"Not yet. We're waitin' till he gets strong enough to talk. Maybe he knows something. If he does—" Hyatt's lazy drawl crisped to ice—" some polecat is goin' to stretch rope."

Cullop mopped his brow with his neckerchief. "Sometimes I feel like stretchin' my own neck," he mumbled. "Just to get shut of this cussed weather. Sometimes I think there never was such a thing as rain. Two or three times I been half a mind to quit. Today I come near doing it. Had a chance to sell, but somehow I just couldn't bring myself to let go."

"Sell!" murmured Clay softly. "Who to?"

"Frisco Drew. He was out to see me. Offered me a pretty decent price. But I've worked so hard and long for that spread of mine, I decided to hang on a little while longer."

"Say," blurted Turk Conroy, "what does Drew want to do—make a king of himself over this whole danged range? He buys out Stevens and Tinsley and Stinchfield, and now wants to buy you out. That hombre shore is ambitious, either that or soft in the head."

"You say he bought out Bob Stinchfield and Tinsley?" demanded the startled Cullop.

"That's right. Got the word straight this afternoon."

"I'll be damned," said Cullop. "He's

either a smart man, or a plain fool, I don't know which."

CLAY got slowly to his feet. In his eyes a thin, strong flame was burning. "Tell Buck when he asks for me that I've drifted, chasing down an idea," he said. "Good night, boys."

The three on the steps stared after him as Clay rode away into the gloom of night.

"There goes a jasper I sometimes can't figure," said Ben Cullop.

"There goes one of the stoutest men, all ways, that I ever knew," said Jerry Hyatt. "Clay is deep. Not any for fuss and feathers or wild jumpin' here and yon. He's slow and quiet. Look what happened to Spike Kirby and Shell Ringo in the Humbug back a few nights ago when Clay swung on 'em. Clay Garrison, Ben, is smart as a whip with the nerve of a lion. And if he says he's got an idea, you can bet he's got an idea."

"Right," chimed in Turk Conroy. "Right all the way, Jerry. . . ."

It did not take Clay Garrison long to reach town, and once there he headed straight for the sheriff's office. Waller was surprised to see him again so soon.

"You remind me of a danged grasshopper," said Bill Waller. "You're in and out, here and yonder all the time, Clay. What you got on your mind? Buck actin' up again already?"

Clay shook his head. "No. I think Buck is over the peak, Bill. He's different than he's been for a long time. No, it isn't about Buck that I'm here. It's about Frisco Dan Drew."

Waller's eyes narrowed. "What about Frisco Drew?"

"Today he bought out Tinsley and Stinchfield, and offered to buy out Ben Cullop."

"And the other day he bought out Boley Stevens," Waller murmured.

"After Boley's best water-hole had been poisoned," Clay said softly. "And yesterday Rock Orde was mysteriously shot. Something vicious is forming on this range."

"I don't doubt it."

"What's more, Bill, Turk Conroy tells me that Stinchfield has been losing a lot at the Humbug. It was Turk's idea that maybe Bob got to owing Drew more money than he could pay."

Waller reached for his hat. "Think I'll go over and have a talk with Drew. I won't act suspicious. I'll just make it sort of casual-like and see how he acts when I tell him I've heard about him buying out these ranchers. Want to come along?"

"No. I'll be getting on home. Play your cards careful, Bill."

"Leave that to me." The sheriff nodded.

V

ON THE solitary ride back to the Sleeping G Clay tried to keep his thoughts on the problem he had just brought to Bill Waller. But in spite of himself, those thoughts persisted in switching back to Rock Orde's spread, back to a slim girl who had appeared like a shadow in the gloom and, with that deep, thrilling note in her voice had called Buck's name.

Clay Garrison was not the sort to delude himself with false hopes and fears. He was a practical man when dealing with facts, whether those facts hurt or not. As far back, almost, as he could remember, the vision of Leigh Orde had been in his heart. The cool, pure honesty of her, the slim, gay grace, the fine, tempered courage—these things he had accepted as the certain attributes of the only girl. He knew that, in his eyes, there could never be another like her.

When her father had first been brought in, dangerously wounded by some sneaking bushwhacker's bullet, she had sent for him. But that was only because, in her grief and shock, she remembered what her father had told her to do. It wasn't her heart that had sent for him; it was her numbed and distracted brain.

Tonight, happy with the knowledge that Rock Orde was making a successful fight for life, she had thrilled to the knowledge that Buck had come to her. In her single word of greeting, there had been her heart speaking.

Clay shook himself savagely. He couldn't go on being maudlin over this thing. After all, Buck was his brother,

his kid brother. And Buck needed someone like Leigh Orde. She could give Buck the background of moral strength he needed. She could make a man out of Buck. And she couldn't help where her heart led her.

That wistfulness and ache within him—well, he'd just have to endure it and let the years mellow it. He had just as well set about subduing it right now. His face took on that craggy, indomitable look and he lifted his eyes to the stars.

A dry, parching wind was beginning to blow, a wind full of a strange kind of electricity that set a man's teeth on edge and made his horse irritable and nervous. Clay's mount took to shying at imaginary shadows.

He quieted the edgy brute with strong hands and stern words.

He built a cigarette and twisted in the saddle to shelter the flame of a match from the wind. At that moment something struck him a terrific blow on the side of the head. The universe exploded in a burst of blazing, weird-colored lights. In a numb, stricken sort of way, Clay realized that he was toppling from his saddle. And as he fell it seemed that he heard, thin and broken in the wail of the wind, the fluttering echoes of a gunshot.

The earth came up to meet him and he struck it soddenly. Then he was in blackness, drifting—drifting. . . .

When Clay recovered consciousness it was still black dark. The wind had died down. The stars seemed cooler, more gentle. For a long time he lay as he had fallen, drugged with a numb lassitude. His brain seemed to have frozen, refusing to function. He merely lay there, looking up at the stars with dazed, uncomprehending eyes.

But after a time the tide of returning strength which had brought him back to consciousness rose higher in him, gradually clearing his brain of shock. His senses began to function; feeling returned. He realized that his head was all one thundering ache. On one side of his face the night air felt cooler, because something wet and sticky was smeared there.

[*Turn page*]

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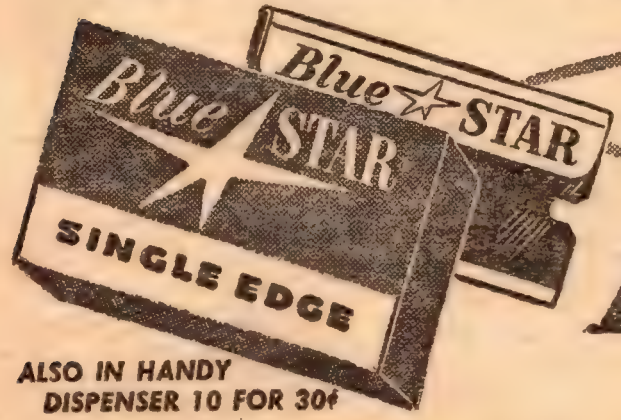

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He began to hear again. Something was stamping the earth near him. Of a sudden he realized that it was his horse, restless but faithful, waiting for him to get up and ride.

Instinct brought Clap up on one elbow. Just in time he locked his jaws to keep back a groan of agony. He flattened out again, for the stars had begun to dance crazily once more. He lay for a long time with his eyes closed. But that movement seemed to start his brain really to working. He realized now what had happened. Some bushwhacker along the trail had taken a shot at him, had bounced a slug off the side of his head.

IN TIME Clay stirred once more and again got to an elbow. This time he stayed there, his jaw set to rigid whiteness, while he fought off weakness and nausea and that terrible, thundering pain. He got to his knees and put one exploring hand to his head. It came away sticky with blood. Clay tried to get to his feet, but couldn't make it. So he crawled slowly over to his horse, which snorted and stamped, but did not move away from him.

He reached up, got hold of a stirrup and pulled himself to his feet. But for the horse he would have fallen again. He leaned against the faithful animal, his wounded head dropping down to rest against the smooth, hard curve of the saddle.

He never did remember how he got into that saddle. Only sheer, stark will of the most indomitable kind could have been the answer. But get into the saddle he did and, as he hunched forward over the horn, sick and dizzy, the horse struck out at a swinging walk.

Clay must have lost consciousness again, for he remembered almost nothing of the ride home. When he did come to the realization that his horse was standing still, he looked around, dazedly recognizing shadowy corral and bulked feed sheds. He slid to the ground, used the corral fence as far as he could for support, then struck out for the ranchhouse, weaving and stumbling like a man thoroughly drunk.

He had only one thought now—water to satiate his terrible thirst. He wobbled up the porch steps and over to the water olla. And then he drank. The water was only reasonably cool and it was hard and bitter with alkali, but it was nectar to Clay that night.

It reached all through him, that wonderful water. It cooled his feverish blood, it drove the worst of the mists from his brain. And when his thirst was fully quenched, Clay poured dipperful after dipperful over his wounded head. The water stung that ragged wound, but it was wet and cool and it drove the mist in his brain away.

A floor board creaked and out of the door stepped Buck.

"Clay!" he said sharply. "What the devil! Say, where you been? You—you're not drunk?"

"No, kid," Clay answered thickly. "But some polecat hid out along the town trail tried to blow my head off and blame near succeeded. Help me inside."

Buck got him inside and onto a bunk. Then he lit a lamp. He caught his breath sharply at sight of Clay's head. He ran out of the house and down to the bunkhouse. Soon he was back with old Charley Curtis. Luke Pierce was already splitting the wind for the R O Up and Down for Doc Peets. And though Buck and Charley tried to mop some of the dirt and blood off that wounded head, Clay went out again. . . .

The next time he opened his eyes, Clay found that his head was heavily bandaged, that he was between blankets and that it was day once more. Sunlight blazed through the windows of the room and the air was hot and dead. Three people were in the room with him—Buck, Sheriff Waller and Charley Curtis. Buck was mixing something in a glass. He leaned over Clay.

"Drink this, old-timer," he said gravely. "Doc Peets left it for you to take."

Clay downed the draught, shuddered, then managed a wry grin.

"Well, here we are again," he mumbled. "Hi, Bill."

The sheriff's face was quiet and grim. "You had one devilish close call, cowboy," he said. "Doc Peets said you must have a head like a rock. What do you remember about getting hit?"

Clay blinked. "I had just built a cigarette and was going to light it. There was a wind blowing and I turned in the saddle a little to shield the match. Then, *blooie!* it hit me. While I was fallin' I thought I heard gun echoes. That's all I know except coming out of it, getting into the saddle and riding home."

"You want to bless that wind," growled Waller. "If you hadn't turned a little as you lit that match that slug would have gone straight through your head. As it is, according to Doc, if you've got the same kind of grizzly bear constitution as Rock Orde, you'll be ridin' again in a couple of days. Can you recall about where it happened, Clay?"

CLAY squinted painfully.

"Wasn't paying much attention," he mumbled. "Thinking of other things. I remember my bronc acting kind of nervous, shying considerable. Yeah, I rememeber now, Bill. It was down on that little ridge. Reckon that polecat was hid out in some of that brush."

Waller nodded. "I'll have a look around when I'm headin' back to town. Remember what we were talking about last night? Well, I'm just about convinced we're right. Soon as I get a little more evidence, I'm calling a showdown."

"What you two talkin' about?" asked Buck.

"Just an idea," said Waller. "Well, best thing we can do is clear out and let the old maverick get some rest. Best thing in the world for a sore top-knot."

"Reckon that's what Doc Peets figured," murmured Clay sleepily. "That medicine—"

He was asleep before he could finish. . . .

The next day Clay was up and around again, a little shaky, but with the old strength surging stronger and stronger in him with every passing hour. His head was sore, but that terrible numb feeling had left it. Doc Peets dropped over in the morning to put a fresh dressing on it.

"How you missed a bad concussion, I don't know," confessed Doc.

"Just plain lunk-headed, I reckon," Clay grinned. "How's Rock?"

"Going to get well—and when I first saw him I wouldn't have given a cent for his chances."

"He able to talk yet?"

"Oh, yes. Bill Waller was out to see him. But Rock don't know who shot him. He was up along the river when it happened. One minute he was riding free and fine. The next he had a slug in him. That's all."

Clay squinted soberly. "Better lay in a lot of bandages and medicine, Doc. You're going to need them. There's a pot of hell's brew on this range and the lid is about due to fly off."

"So I figured." Peets nodded. "Men are the biggest fools. They shoot one another and I patch 'em up so they can go out and get shot again."

That afternoon Leigh Orde rode in. Sitting on the porch, Clay's heart took a truant leap at sight of her. Always she was like a sweet wind, cool and fragrant. Clay wondered at the strange shyness that was in her eyes. She stood before him, slim and straight.

"If this shooting doesn't stop, I'm going to go crazy," she said soberly. "First Dad and now you, Clay. What does it mean?"

"That there is a rotten spot on this range that will have to be cleaned out. But don't you worry your pretty head about it. Here, sit down and let me look at you a while."

She gave a queer little laugh, but obeyed. "Anyone would think that was a pleasure."

"It is. You've got no idea how much it is."

She looked away, soft color beating in her cheeks. "You did a good job on Buck, Clay," she said. "He is almost like his old self again."

"You can thank Bill Waller a lot for that. I think it was a broadside that Bill threw at the kid that had the most effect. . . . Doc tells me your dad is on the way up."

"That's right, and I'm so happy about it. Yet he's already making threats as to what he'll do when he's able to be up and doing again. And maybe next time—" She broke off, shivering.

"I wouldn't worry none about that,

was I you," Clay comforted. "By the time Rock Orde is ready to ride again, this range will either be blowed plumb to pieces, or it will be quiet and healthy again."

She looked directly at him. "Clay, I'm no child and I can be trusted. Tell me, who do you think is responsible for this trouble?"

Clay was silent for a moment, then he shrugged.

"Remember, Leigh, what I think and what are the facts may be two different things. But you asked me who I think is responsible, so I'll tell you. Frisco Dan Drew."

"Frisco Drew!" She stared at him. "Why, I spoke to him this morning, in town. He . . . Why, are you sure of that?"

"I only told you what I think," said Clay. "Oh, I'm not saying that Drew actually pulled the trigger on your father and me. But my bet is that whoever did it was under orders from Drew. Me, I didn't know you were acquainted with Drew."

He was looking at her thoughtfully. Silence between them grew strained.

VI

LEIGH colored a little, for there was a certain censure in Clay Garrison's words. But she met the scrutiny of his glance without flinching.

"I've known Mr. Drew for a long time, Clay," she said finally. "Dad introduced us himself. And I hope I'll never be a snob. Frisco Drew may run a saloon and a gambling hall, but as long as he is a gentleman in my presence there is no reason why I should ignore him, is there?"

Clay made an impatient gesture. "Oh, I suppose not," he grumbled. "But you're so clean and fine, Leigh. It just seems to me . . . Oh, well, I reckon it's none of my business."

She looked at him guardedly, then laughed softly. "You men! You frequent the Humbug. You drink there and play cards there and think nothing of it. But if one of your womenfolk speaks to the man who runs the place you're upset about it."

"Maybe you're right." Clay shrugged. "But a man tries to keep his ideals way up above, as far away from things like that as he can."

"Am I an ideal?" she asked.

Clay looked at her with strange intentness. "You are to me. I'd like to keep you way up on the clouds and sunshine, always."

Color fluttered in her cheeks, her laugh was a trifle shaky.

"I'm not ready to be an angel just yet, Clay. And I haven't any of the qualifications. But coming back to serious things. Why would Frisco Drew want Dad and you shot?"

"Drew has bought out Tinsley and Stinchfield and Boley Stevens," Clay said gravely. "He tried to buy out Ben Cullop. For all we know Drew may be one of these jaspers who dream of a range empire. Many men before him have. Yet, no man could fully control Buttonwillow range unless he also had control of the RO Up and Down and the Sleeping G. Your dad's spread and this ranch here are the heart of the range. Drew might have figured it that neither Rock Orde nor I would think of selling out. But if Rock and I were both dead, you and Buck might be persuaded to let go of the holdings."

Leigh went pale. "You make it sound awfully cold-blooded," she murmured.

"Men get that way when they play for big stakes. And Drew has always been a gambler. Me, I've studied Frisco Drew more than once. Looking at him, you get just as far as his eyes. There you stop. You can't see past them, or get a single hint of what is going on in back of those eyes. The man is deep and, I'll bet, ruthless."

Leigh got slowly to her feet.

"Now I'm scared, scared into fits," she said plaintively. "I know I'll have bad dreams."

"Remember you asked for facts," Clay reminded.

"I know." She nodded. "Well, anyhow, I'm mighty glad your wound wasn't too serious, Clay."

"Thanks. It was good of you to ride over, Leigh."

"Where is Buck?" she asked.

"Out with the boys, nagging those poor, tortured brutes of cattle around. If we don't get rain pretty quick, this

Buttonwillow range won't be worth anything to anybody."

She nodded thoughtfully. Then she started briskly down the steps. She halted abruptly however, as a rider came cantering up from the creek. That rider was Frisco Dan Drew.

Frisco Dan Drew sat a horse well. His dress, however, was somewhat dandified, being high, glossy Cordovan boots, riding breeches of dove gray whipcord and a sheer, white silk shirt with a flowing gray tie. His Stetson was new and white and expensive. His only concession to the mode of the country was a holstered gun at his hip.

He dismounted, took off his hat and bowed low to Leigh, his hard, black eyes running over her in a look of speculative admiration which made Clay grit his teeth.

"Miss Orde!" Drew exclaimed, in his softest, most slurring tones. "This is a pleasure. Don't let me drive you away. I have a little business I want to talk over with Garrison, then I am riding up to your father's ranch to congratulate him on his fortunate recovery. If you are heading for home, I'd enjoy escorting you there."

Leigh hesitated slightly, then shook her head. "I'm afraid I can't wait, Mr. Drew. I've overstayed now. I've got to get right back."

SHE slid lithely into her saddle, turned, looked past and over Drew, threw up a hand in farewell to Clay, who waved back, a gleam of pride in his eyes. Then she was gone, swiftly.

Drew watched her out of sight, then climbed the steps to the porch. His face displayed no outward sign of his feelings over the snub, but Clay knew that inside the fellow was raging. Drew spoke abruptly.

"Sorry to hear about your accident, Garrison. And glad you are coming out of it so fast."

"No accident," Clay said. "Just some sneaking coyote who tried to drygulch me. . . . What is this business you want to talk over with me?"

"Perhaps I should have said business with your brother, Buck," returned Drew smoothly. "I've spoken to Buck about it a couple of times, but he didn't give me much satisfaction. Now, seeing that I've made several investments in the past few days, I find myself forced to come to you, for I need every dollar I can get hold of. Coming right to the point, Buck owes me eighteen hundred dollars—poker debts. I have his I.O.U. for all of it. Care to see them?"

Clay stared at Drew. "Eighteen hundred dollars! That's a lot of money, Drew."

"Exactly. And the reason I'm here." From a hip pocket Drew produced a number of slips of paper. "Look 'em over," he said.

There was no mistaking the authenticity of the I. O. U.s. Each was in Buck's handwriting and Clay found the accumulated total correct. Behind the craggy impassiveness of his face, Clay's mind was racing. These I. O. U.s could account for many things, primarily for that burst of strange activity on the part of Buck, his sullenness, his edgy waywardness. Clay got slowly to his feet.

"I'll go write a check for these," he said. "That satisfactory?"

"Perfectly."

When Clay returned with the check, Drew glanced at it, pocketed it, then tore the I. O. U.s to bits and tossed them aside.

"Sorry I had to press the debt," he purred. "Ordinarily I wouldn't have. Hope this won't change our friendship."

Clay laughed harshly. "Stow it, Drew. Let's take the masks off. You and I have never been friends, and never could be. You know that as well as I do."

Drew smiled thinly and shrugged. "All right with me, Garrison. You're pretty direct, but you're right. I'll go to my grave hating your insides. And for reasons I can hardly define. Queer, isn't it?"

"Maybe, maybe not," said Clay brusquely. "But you've called the turn. You're smooth, Drew, smooth as butter. But there are some of us along this river you're not fooling at all. Here's a tip. Don't let your ambitions reach too high. Else you'll have a longer way

to drop. As far as Buck is concerned, I reckon he'll never flip a card across one of your poker tables again. Next time he plays it will be in an honest layout."

Just a fleck of crimson showed in Drew's eyes, to be masked immediately.

"Poker debts always do gripe those who have to pay," he murmured.

"There are other kinds of debts which gripe, too. And you're building up one of them, Drew. It will take a heap to square it, a lot more than will be pleasant to pay. But you'll pay, all right."

Drew's eyes narrowed. "What you driving at?"

"You guess. Now—drift. And don't come back."

For a moment their eyes locked. Red hate lanced back and forth between them. That hate had always been a living flame between these two men, but never before had it been in the open.

"I might add," went on Clay, "that if I were you I wouldn't bother to ride up to see Rock Orde. You won't find your welcome too hearty."

Drew whirled on his heels and walked down the steps. There was fury in the way he hit his saddle, the way he spurred his mount to movement. And Clay smiled grimly as he saw Drew head, not for the R O Up and Down, but straight back for town.

AFTER supper that night Buck Garrison walked out and stood on the porch beside his elder brother, who sat there staring out into the hot gloom. The air was thick and lifeless in a man's lungs and had the smell of scorched, burned dust. Overhead, even the stars looked feverish. At intervals came the sound of cattle, bellowing mournful complaint against hunger and thirst.

"Clay," said Buck abruptly. "I've got something I have to get off my mind. Oh, I've been a plumb fool, and I wouldn't blame you none if you knocked hell out of me. Clay, I owe Frisco Drew eighteen hundred dollars in gambling debts."

Clay drew a deep breath in sudden relief. "Been waiting for you to come clean, kid. But you don't owe Drew a thing any more. He was out today. I gave him a check for those I. O. U.s."

"You did! He came out to collect them?"

"Yeah."

"That was a lot of money, Clay. I—I feel like a coyote."

"It was cheap enough," Clay said gently, "to get the old kid brother back again. We'll charge that off to experience, Buck, and forget it."

Buck blinked at the sudden blur in his eyes. Good old Clay, staunch and true and steadfast.

"I'll go the rest of the way!" Buck cried hoarsely. "That arsenic powder —Drew sent me after that. Those two days I was gone I rode clear over to Maverick after that powder. I knew it was to be used for no good, but Drew reminded me of those debts. I was just fool enough to let him bluff me. So I went and got it. I know I was a yellow dog. Like a lot of other cussed fools I thought I could bluster my way through. And when I found out I couldn't, I hit the bottle. I wouldn't blame you if you took a quirt to me, Clay."

Clay stood up and put a big hand on his brother's shoulder and shook him slightly.

"Your coming clean squares everything, kid. Who poisoned Boley Stevens' water-hole?"

"Spike Kirby and Shell Ringo. At Drew's orders. Stevens wanted to sell, but Drew figured that by using a couple of dollars' worth of arsenic he could get the ranch for half what Stevens first asked for it. And he did—just about half. That Drew is crooked as they come. He's got ambitions. Two or three times I've heard him make little remarks which didn't mean nothing by themselves, but putting them all together they meant plenty."

"I'd already figured that." Clay nodded. "I don't like fighting any better than anybody else, but if I got to fight, I aim to get in the first wallop, if possible. Go down and throw your kak and mine on a couple of broncs. We're riding in to see Bill Waller."

They did not take the usual trail to town. That bushwhacking shot that

had come so close to costing Clay's life had made him wary. So he and Buck made a wide circle and came into Black Rock from the south. There was a dim light burning in Bill Waller's office. The door was closed, but not locked. When Clay pushed it open, he saw Waller at his desk table. The sheriff was leaning on the table, his head on his arms, as though asleep.

"Hello, Bill," said Clay. "Wake up! I got news for you."

Waller did not move. Clay walked over and took him by the shoulder, shaking him slightly.

"Wake up, Bill."

There was a flaccid inertness about the sheriff. Of a sudden Clay went cold all over.

"Turn up that lamp a little, Buck," he grated. "Something is wrong with Bill."

Buck turned up the lamp, held it high. And Clay's face went into a haggard mask.

"He's dead," he said simply. "Look!"

There was a narrow slit in the back of Bill Waller's shirt. A spreading patch of soggy, sticky wetness clung about that slit.

"Stabbed!" whispered Buck. "Stabbed in the back!"

Clay was like a man turned to stone. Good old Bill Waller, as white a man as ever lived. Brave, four-square, tolerant; a true stalwart friend.

Buck drew a sharp, quivering breath.

"That day, when I was seen riding out by the Lost Hills with Kirby and Ringo. Drew sent us out to make a range count of Boley Stevens' herd. That day we pulled in for a time at the water hole, the one Kirby and Ringo poisoned the next day. Ringo took his shirt off to douse his head and shoulders in the water to cool off. And, Clay, down under his left arm he had a knife strapped on. I saw it—saw it plain."

Clay nodded stiffly. "Turn the light down again," he said tonelessly. "We're going over to the Humbug."

THEY crossed the street, Clay stalking in front. It seemed to Buck that this brother of his was almost a stranger. Only his eyes seemed alive, and these were pin-points of coldest ice.

Just inside the door of the saloon Clay stopped, his glance running over the room. There was quite a crowd present.

"What's all this?" murmured Buck at Clay's shoulder. "Most of these hombres are strangers. This is funny."

Clay didn't answer, though he had noted that most of the riders present, drinking and grouped about the poker tables, were strangers and a hard-bitten lot.

Frisco Drew, Spike Kirby and Shell Ringo were not in evidence. But Ben Cullop was there, with "Skeet" Farnell, his foreman. The two of them walked over to Clay and Buck. Cullop was scowling in puzzlement.

"What do you make of this, Clay?" he asked in a low voice. "Where did all these jaspers come from, and why?"

"I think I've got the answer to that," Clay replied harshly. "Seen Drew or Kirby or Ringo around?"

"No, not tonight. Why?"

"Come outside," growled Clay Garrison.

VII

FARNELL and Cullop sensed the savage tragedy of Clay's mood and followed silently. In the blackness of the overhang of Pete Flood's store, Clay halted.

"Buck and me just came from Bill Waller's office," he stated grimly. "Bill is there, dead!"

Ben Cullop gulped. "Dead?"

"Stabbed in the back."

"That—that's terrible!" stuttered Cullop. "Who—why—"

"I think I know," rasped Clay, "but we've got no time to talk about it now. Anyhow, Buck and me will look after that. You and Skeet go down and get Jigger Dugan's buckboard. Drive it up back of the Emporium. Don't let anybody see you and don't make any noise."

Cullop was still stuttering, dazed by amazement and shock. Skeet Farnell caught Cullop by the arm.

"Come on, Boss. I reckon Clay knows what he's doing."

Farnell and Cullop hurried off.

Old Pete Flood's living quarters were

in one of the rear corners of his store. He answered sleepily to Clay's knock on a side door.

"Who is it?" twanged the old storekeeper. "I ain't goin' to open up to sell some jug-headed cowpunch a dime's worth of smokin'."

"This is Clay Garrison, Pete. It is smoking I want all right, but it ain't the kind you think. And it will be a heap more than a dime's worth. Open up."

Flood lighted a lamp and let Clay and Buck in.

"What's biting you jaspers?" he demanded.

Clay closed the door. "Turn that lamp low, Pete. And listen. Bill Waller is dead. Somebody stabbed him in the back."

Pete Flood's eyes stuck out, his jaw dropped. "Bill Waller—dead?"

"Yeah, Pete, and I want every gun, every cartridge you got in the store. Ben Cullop and Skeet Farnell are bringing a buckboard to the back door for the load. Come on, get busy."

"I got eight rifles and ten six-guns in stock," Pete said, trusting Clay's wisdom at once. "And about seven hundred rounds of ammunition for both kinds . . . Here, I'll break 'em out and you fellers lug 'em to the back door."

The transfer was soon made and when Clay opened the back door to listen, he heard the buckboard coming. "All set?" called Skeet Farnell softly.

"All set, Skeet," answered Clay. "Take this stuff out to the R O Up and Down. Turn it over to Jerry Hyatt. Tell him I'll be over in the morning to explain. Ben, you have all your riders up on their toes. Don't let a man leave the ranch without a rifle under his leg and a six-gun at his belt."

"What you driving at, Clay?" Cullop asked.

"No time to tell you now, Ben. You'll get the whole story later. Only stow this under your belt. You, and every other decent rancher along the Buttonwillow is going to be fighting for his life inside the next few days. All right, Skeet, roll."

The buckboard creaked away into the night. Clay turned to Flood.

"How much for all that stuff, Pete?"

"We'll let it ride for a time," Flood said. "We'll see if you put it to good use. If you do, then it won't cost you a cent. I don't know what this is all about, but if you're going skunk huntin' for the jasper who did for Bill Waller, I'm with you four ways from the ace. I'm goin' to get my old sawed-off Greener, load her up with buckshot and set into things personal. Maybe I can get a bead on the sidewinder who killed Bill."

"You'll have to beat Buck and me to it," Clay said grimly. "In the meantime, keep your eye on Drew."

"Drew? Frisco Drew?"

"Right. And if you see anything going on here in town that strikes you queer, get word to me about it, Pete. And, Pete, will you and Jigger Dugan take care of Bill? Doc Peets will help you, I reckon."

"Yeah," Flood said soberly. "We'll take care of Bill. Good luck in your skunk huntin', boys."

Clay and Buck slipped around to the shadowed front of the Emporium. From there they had an open view of the door of the Humbug.

"Here we wait, Buck," said Clay grimly.

MEN drifted in and out of the Humbug, but not the two they sought. And as the time dragged along until an hour had passed, Buck began to get restless, but Clay waited, motionless. It seemed to Buck that in this elder brother of his there burned a terrible and unquenchable purpose of stark retribution.

It was Buck who first saw Kirby and Ringo. They were on foot, coming from somewhere uptown. They were only dim shadows against the darker bulk of the buildings, but Buck recognized the truculent swagger of Kirby, the slouching shamble of Shell Ringo.

"There they are, Clay."

Instantly Clay was moving, silent and crouched. Buck, shaking with a cold excitement, followed. Kirby and Ringo stopped before the open door of the Humbug to make some remark to a rider who had just emerged. The rider laughed, made some reply and moved on. Kirby and Ringo turned to enter.

"Ringo!" The harsh word rang along the street. "Ringo, I'm looking for you."

Ringo whirled, a hand darting to a gun.

"Who is it?" he blurted thickly. "What you want?"

"This is Clay Garrison. I want to see if Bill Waller's blood is still on that knife of yours."

Ringo's answer was proof of his guilt. He dragged his gun and began to shoot, shoot blindly, the act of a man with the ghost of cold-blooded murder riding him, the act of a man whose nerves were jangling and jumpy with the fear of retribution.

The snarl of Ringo's gun was taken up by the roaring blasts of Clay Garrison's. Crimson flame lanced and stabbed through the darkness. Echoes rattled and clattered the length and breadth of Black Rock's single street.

Shell Ringo began to reel and jerk, as though buffeted by stormy winds. He spun wildly, tried to make for the shelter of the Humbug. But a terrific convulsion racked him and he fell limply, half in, half out of the door. And as Ringo fell, Spike Kirby dived clear over him, to the safety beyond.

"All right, Buck," Clay said icily. "That's that. Now we're riding."

They stepped across the street to their horses, swung into their saddles. Someone was shooting at them from the door of the Humbug. Clay turned in the saddle and dropped the fellow across the body of Ringo, then emptied his guns at the door and windows of the place.

Inside the Humbug men were yelling and cursing. But no other reckless one showed at the door until Clay and Buck had put Black Rock behind them and were spurring through the hot night beyond.

Buck was aquiver with excitement and a strange exultation. But Clay rode grimly, stony cold. For Clay knew that when he had downed Ringo, he had done two things. He had avenged Bill Waller, but he also had struck the first return blow in the rising war for the mastery of the Buttonwillow range. . . .

[*Turn page*]

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Just after sunup the following morning, Clay led his outfit up to the R O Up and Down corrals. Every man of them was armed, every man grave and quiet. Clay had told them about Bill Waller and how he, Clay, had downed Shell Ringo. And he had told them of what he thought was due to break on the Buttonwillow. Their response had been significant. They had quietly slung Winchesters to their saddles, and loaded their gun-belts to the last loop.

Ben Cullop and his C Cross crew were already at the R O Up and Down. Cullop came out to meet him, along with Jerry Hyatt.

"On the way home, I got to thinking, Clay," said Cullop. "I figured that fighting alone we couldn't do much, but by combining our outfits, we can give out plenty of trouble. If you'll only let us all in on what you figure we got to lick."

"Fair enough, Ben. Call all the boys around. You, too, Jerry—get your crew out here."

QUICKLY the riders were all surrounding Clay, waiting silently.

"Maybe a lot of you boys got this figured out, same as me," he said, as they gathered close around. "But here is how I see it: Frisco Drew bought out Boley Stevens, Tinsley and Bob Stinchfield. He tried to get Ben Cullop to sell, but didn't have any luck. He knew that Rock Orde and I never would. So Rock Orde is mysteriously shot and nearly killed. They try to bushwhack me. It adds up to Drew being out to grab all of Buttonwillow range. He knows the drought can't last forever, and when the rains do come, the range will be rich, like it was before."

"How about Bill Waller being killed?" demanded one of the riders. "You figure Drew had a hand in that, Clay?"

"He was behind it. I'd gamble my life on that. Bill and I had more than one talk together. Bill was beginning to see through Drew's plan. Drew knew it, and he knew that Bill was the one man with the authority to make an arrest that would have spoiled Drew's plan. And so Bill Waller was killed."

"And that's why I want to get a bead on Drew," growled a rider. "Any skunk that would use a knife on a man like Bill Waller—"

"Drew didn't actually use the knife, Chuck," said Clay. "Shell Ringo did, and Ringo is dead. Buck and I took care of him last night."

"What do you think Drew will do now, Clay?" asked Cullop.

"You saw all that crowd of strange, tough riders in the Humbug last night, Ben. Well, there's only one answer. Drew must have brought them in to fight. One thing is certain. Without the R O Up and Down, without the C Cross and the Sleeping G, Drew can never hope to control the Buttonwillow. The spreads he's bought up all lay around the edge of things. But these three big outfits are the heart of the range, and Drew must have them if he wants to make his play stick. I don't know where he'll hit, or exactly how. But my bet is that he'll hit somewhere."

"We'll give that whelp what-for," Jerry Hyatt said.

"The time to start is now," said Clay. "Jerry, pick out four men and send 'em out to scout in all directions. Unless Drew is a bigger fool than I think, he'll know by this time that we're wise to him. He won't wait too long before he makes his next move, because the longer he waits, the stronger our hand will be. I've got a man in town watching, but we've got to have men scouting the range, all the time. Do that, Jerry?"

"Right now, Clay. All for one, one for all."

Clay heard his name called in clear tones and he looked over to the ranchhouse to see Leigh Orde standing on the porch. He stalked slowly over to her. She was plainly anxious, worried-looking.

"Clay," she exclaimed, "what does this mean? Why are you and Ben Cullop here with all your riders?"

"Remember what I was telling you about Frisco Drew yesterday, Leigh? Well, it looks like I was right. We all agree that he's out to gobble the Buttonwillow range. We're just getting ready for him."

"Then it means—fight?"

"It means fight." Clay nodded. Then he added harshly, "I should have gunned him yesterday, down at the ranch, when I had him face to face and dead to rights. If I had, it might have saved Bill Waller."

"Bill Waller! What about him?"

"You haven't heard?"

"I've heard nothing."

"Bill Waller was killed last night by Shell Ringo," Clay said somberly.

Leigh caught at a porch post, going dead white. "B-Bill Waller!" she whispered.

"Ringo killed him," Clay said, with savagery in his tone. "Ringo's a knifer and, another thing, he got panicky. I was able to even up some. I got Ringo. But Drew was behind it. I'm as certain of that as I am that he was behind the attemp's to get your father and me. We law-abiding folks have let a wolf run loose among us."

CLAY saw tears well up in Leigh's clear, fine eyes.

"Dear old Bill," she choked. "He was so fair, so kind!"

Clay put a hand on her shoulder. "It's tough, little pardner. Not since my father's death has anything hurt me as bad. But it's done, and we've got to make the best of it. But we won't forget."

Her head came up bravely. "We mustn't let Dad know yet," she said. "If he heard it, sick and weak as he is, Dad would climb right out of bed and buckle on his guns. He and Bill were such old friends. Oh, Clay, I'm so glad I didn't ride with that—that—"

"So am I. Remember always, Frisco Drew is a wolf. And here is something I want you to promise. Until this thing is settled, one way or another, I don't want you to ride a foot away from this ranchhouse unless one of the boys is along with you."

"I promise," she told him firmly.

VIII

SLOWLY the hours wore away. Clay went over to the R O Up and Down bunkhouse, where the combined forces of the three big ranches, less the four men Jerry Hyatt had sent out as scouts, were gathered in grim silence.

Clay fell to wondering if he hadn't jumped the gun. Maybe Drew wouldn't show his hand for some time yet. And he might strike in a way totally unsuspected. However, cold analysis of the situation led to the inescapable conclusion that Drew would strike swiftly.

Trouble broke suddenly in a clatter of hoofs speeding down from the north. It was Turk Conroy, who had been out on scout. Turk came to a rearing halt, his mount foaming.

"Grab your guns and broncs!" he yelled. "Trouble is a-rollin'. Looks like all of the T Bar and Circle S cows are moving down on us. And plenty of riders are drivin' 'em!"

"Tinsley and Stinchfield cows!" exclaimed Clay. "It's Drew's first move, and a shrewd one. He owns those brands now and he's aiming to pour those herds down onto our range and water when we ain't got enough for our own stock. We got to stop 'em! Come on boys, we ride!"

The concerted movement of the riders was almost like an explosion. They went into their saddles and pounded away into the north, Turk Conroy and Clay in the lead.

Within half a mile they sighted the rolling dust cloud of the approaching cattle. And within two miles more they sighted the herd. It came on slowly, spread in a wide front, for those cattle were weak and grudged the movement of the drive. Beyond, like phantoms in the dust, riders darted here and there, urging the cattle forward.

Clay, standing high in his stirrups, made a rough count of those distant riders.

"About thirty of them," he told Jerry Hyatt. "We're outnumbered almost two to one. We'd be in a tight spot if those cattle were strong and well-fed. As it is, they can't stir that herd to a run. There ain't a chance for a stampede, so we don't need to worry much about holding the middle. We'll split up. You take half our boys and I'll take the other half, Jerry. You swing east, I'll go west. We'll get 'em between us. Open up as soon as you're in rifle range."

The ranchers and their men split up

and swung apart at a driving gallop, and the wild bunch with the cattle threw men out on either flank for protection. But as soon as they did this they found themselves with a white elephant on their hands. The cattle, weak and protesting of any movement at all, slowed to a stop as the pressure of the drive was taken off them.

This nullified the best weapon the wild bunch had. For unless they could throw the cattle across the frugal range and water-holes of the R O Up and Down and Sleeping G acres, to overrun everything like a horde of locusts, the whole point of their attack would fail. The leader of the outlaw crowd drew his men back from the flanks to force the herd into movement once more.

The first rifles began to snarl and rap then. Hissing lead whined about the ears of Clay and his staunch little group. A slug told with a thud and a horse collapsed, throwing its rider headlong. The rider, jarred but unhurt, came up cursing, to begin levering shot after shot.

Clay did not halt in his ride until he was in a spot which directly flanked the men with the herd. Then he pulled up and jumped from saddle.

"Down on the ground!" he yelled. "You can't do any good shooting from a running bronc."

Boot heels bit into the earth all about him and rifles took up their wild song. And at this moment Jerry Hyatt and his men started in from the east side. They had the disconcerted wild bunch with the herd in a crossfire and the results were quick and deadly.

Snarling lead raked the line of renegades from one end to the other. Men and horses began going down, scattering. Some leader among them whose fury was greater than his judgment, rallied a small group and led them in a furious charge, right at Clay and his few valiants.

"Pick that hombre on the blaze-faced sorrel!" yelled Clay. "He's leading them."

THE leader was riding high in his stirrups, exhorting his men on. He jerked this way and that as lead took him, and left his saddle in a whipping tangle of loose arms and legs. The charge broke and scattered, every man for himself.

Of a sudden the entire group with the herd broke and rode for it, plainly without stomach for any more of the blazing wrath being poured in on them. Despite having lost several men, they still outnumbered the cattlemen heavily, but the setup was such that those odds meant nothing at the moment.

"Hold it!" shouted Clay. "They've got enough for the time. Guess they didn't figure we'd be organized like this. Looks like they're pulling out completely."

This was true. The hired gunfighters gathered on a low rise, a good thousand yards away. For a time they grouped there, then in a dark, slow riding mass, they vanished into the north and east.

Charley Curtis spat in huge contempt. "Headin' back for town to lap up booze and try and build up fresh nerve again."

A rider came swirling through the thick haze of dust—Jerry Hyatt, his bronzed face split in a cold grin.

"They got a-plenty—quick," he said. "What next, Clay?"

"Make sure they've called it a day, then start these cattle back where they belong."

"Come on, Buck," said Charley Curtis. "You and me will ride a ways and check up."

It was on Clay's tongue to call the eager Buck back and send one of the other men. There might be an ambush out there. And Buck, his kid brother . . . Clay shrugged. Buck was one of them. He'd have to take his chances.

Clay's fears were groundless, however. Buck and Charley rode out past that distant rise, disappeared for a few moments, then came jogging back. Clay relaxed.

"They've called it a day," he said. "We can start moving the cattle. Any of your crowd hurt, Jerry?"

"Stew Alton stopped one with his left arm and Jim Colyer lost his bronc."

"Send Stew back to the ranch for attention. We'll catch up a riderless bronc for Jim. Then for the cattle."

When Clay and the crowd rode back to the R O Up and Down, Leigh Orde

came flying out to the corrals to meet them. Her eyes flashed from face to face as though she were counting noses, and she seemed to relax when she saw that all were there.

Clay's heart warmed within him. This girl had fought also, fought in the terrible, slow stillness of being alone and not knowing whether faithful men were out dying or living as they fought for her, as well as for themselves. And she had had to wait until they returned, to learn that there were, as yet, no deaths of friends to haunt her memory.

"We were plenty lucky, Leigh," Clay told her gently. "Stew Alton was the only one hurt. How is he?"

"Doing all right," she answered a little tremulously. "I bandaged his arm." She turned back to the house.

Jerry Hyatt came up to Clay. "Where do we go from here, cowboy?"

"Who knows, Jerry? I don't think we have much to worry about for a day or two. Drew will have to organize again. But we can't take any chances. I think Ben Cullop and I should send a couple of men out to our spreads to keep guard. Drew may take it into his head to have a few matches dropped where they would do the most good."

"I'll tend to that right away."

"Fine. And maybe tonight you and I will drift in to look over the town on the sly and see what we can pick up."

Just at dusk Doc Peets drove in in his buckboard.

"What happened out here today?" he asked. "I spent a couple of hours in town this afternoon patching up half a dozen gents with bullet-holes in them."

CLAY explained briefly.

"Glad you came out, Doc," he said then. "Stew Alton is in the bunkhouse with a smashed arm."

"I figured I might be needed," said Doc. "Pete Flood, Jigger Dugan, a couple of other boys around town and I—we buried Bill this morning. And Frisco Drew was there, with his hat off, looking mighty grieved."

"The dirty, crooked hypocrite!" exploded Clay. "Doc, that whelp killed old Bill just as sure as though he had stuck that knife into him himself."

"Of course." Doc nodded. "Pete and Jigger and me all agreed to that. But we kept our mouths shut. Right now Frisco Dan Drew is high dog in Black Rock. The town is swarming with his gun bullies."

"Drew is open game to the first one of our boys who can get a bead on him," snapped Clay.

"Soon as I get through with Alton and have a look at Rock Orde, I'm going over that head of yours again," Doc Peets said. "You're looking plenty peaked and haggard. You're not made of steel, you know."

Clay went over to the bunkhouse and stretched out on a bunk. He did feel a little rocky now that the excitement had died out. Doc Peets worked over Stew Alton and gave the wounded puncher a hypodermic to put him to sleep. From this job Doc went up to the main house to see how Rock Orde was making it.

When he returned a half-hour later, Leigh Orde was with him. And while Doc stripped the grimed, dusty bandage from Clay's head, Leigh stood beside the bunk and smiled down at him. It seemed to Clay that the combination of shadows and yellow lamplight filled her eyes with a certain vague mystery, a certain tenderness. Just, he thought, the natural pity of a woman for a wounded man.

She helped Doc Peets put a fresh bandage in place. Here and there her fingers would fall, deft and gentle and cool.

"Hurt you, Clay?" asked Doc, as Clay's lips twisted and tightened.

"No, not a bit, Doc. I was just thinking."

After that, it seemed that Leigh's touch trembled, ever so slightly.

Clay went to supper with the boys. The men Jerry Hyatt had sent to the Sleeping G and the C Cross returned to report everything quiet. Walking back to the bunkhouse Ben Cullop dropped in beside Clay.

"Reckon me and the boys can pull out for home for the night," said Cullop. "I'll leave one man here, Clay, to act as messenger if we're needed in a hurry."

Clay nodded. "I don't think a thing will break tonight."

It was while the C Cross outfit was saddling up that Pete Flood came jogging in from the night. Clay knew a quick alarm.

"Anything wrong in town, Pete?"

"Nothing, except that it's overrun with a flock of cussed coyotes," answered the old storekeeper tartly. "They're plenty warm under the collar, Clay. You shore hurt their feelin's today. They'd be out here after you in the dark, except for one thing. They're short of ammunition."

"What?"

"Exactly. Drew was in to see me late this afternoon. Said he wanted all the cartridges in the place. And when I told him you'd beat him to 'em, he was so mad he foamed. He made me write out a big order and he sent a couple of men with a buckboard hellity-pickety for Maverick after that order. Which means he's plenty low on shootin' lead. Does that suggest anything to you?"

"You old fox, what you driving at?"

Pete Flood grinned bleaky into the darkness. "That crowd's lappin' up booze like prairie dogs, and they're short on shells. It just struck me that maybe was you to hit them, instead of waiting until they're stout and full of fight again, you might bust Drew wide open. Tonight would be a fine time."

For a moment Clay stood still. Then he whirled and yelled.

"Ben Cullop, Jerry Hyatt—all you boys, gather round!"

Clay shot the import of Pete Flood's news and suggestion that they strike while the iron was hot, at the listening group. Growls of enthusiasm answered him.

"A couple of hours after midnight will be just about right," said Charley Curtis. "A man who's been hittin' the bottle all night ain't much good about then. And that crowd seems to like their snake juice."

"It's settled then," said Clay. "We go for them. Pete, we won't forget you for bringing us this word."

"Aw, shucks!" grunted Pete. "That's all right. Me and Jigger Dugan aim to pull a trigger or two ourselves tonight. We're both rememberin' Bill Waller."

"And we're not exactly forgetting him," Clay said grimly.

IX

IT WAS near eleven o'clock before Clay and his mean were ready to ride. Pete Flood had already returned to town.

Just before leaving, Clay had talked to Leigh Orde, telling her what they intended doing.

"I think we can win," he told her soberly. "If I didn't I wouldn't lead the boys to town. But just in case I'm wrong, I want you to be on the watch tonight, little pardner. You stay inside. Lock all the doors. Don't let anybody in the house unless you recognize the voice."

Leigh quietly promised to do as he advised. As he turned to go, she made an impulsive little gesture which, in the dark, he did not see. Her hands fluttered out toward him, then were withdrawn, twisting nervously. And she called after him, in a voice which trembled just the slightest.

"Be careful, Clay, please!"

Clay and his men took a round-about route to town. They came up on the far western edge of Black Rock and stopped a quarter of a mile from town. Clay dismounted and waited for the men to gather around him.

"You and me," he told Jerry Hyatt, "we'll go in and look things over. The rest of you boys wait here. And keep quiet."

Clay and Jerry went forward on foot. They came up in the black shadow of a building and paused there a moment. The night air was queerly thick, hot and stifling. And there was an electric feeling to it that prickled the skin, laid heat along the spine and set a man on edge.

They moved out until they could look along the street. Most of the town was dark and silent. The Humbug Saloon however, was lighted up, and hoarse bursts of laughter, drunken curses, and the quavering notes of a song sounded from it.

Clay and Jerry went on down the street, clinging to shadows. They passed the Humbug on the far side of the street. They passed Bill Waller's office, now dark and still. Clay knew a quick tightening in his throat. And

the stark, grim purpose of the night rose stronger and stronger in him.

At the lower end of the street they dodged across, to come to a halt by the yawning door of the livery barn. A low voice, thick with the brogue of old Ireland, came to them.

"Over here, ye terriers."

They found Jigger Dugan and Pete Flood there.

"We been checking up, Jigger and me," explained Pete Flood hurriedly. "They ain't scattered none. They're all of them at the Humbug, and most of 'em pretty drunk. You couldn't ask a better time, Clay."

"The town folks laying low?" asked Clay.

"You'd be surprised," answered Pete. "You're going to have plenty of help when things break, Clay. The decent folks here in town sort of tolerated Frisco Drew before, but they're plumb off him now, and that bunch of whelps he's gathered around him. Dave Granger's wife was talked to pretty insultin' by one of that wild bunch this evenin'. It was all Jigger and me could do to keep Dave from gettin' out his big buffalo Sharpes gun and goin' huntin'. You'll hear that big cannon roar tonight. Right now Dave is layin' out on top of the old Sunset House, ready to go."

"Folks in this town thought plenty of Bill Waller," said Jigger.

The little Irishman wriggled nervously. "What's it in the air tonight?" he complained. "I'm after being jumpy as a cat. Never did I feel so queer. Look, all the stars are gone."

"We're all on edge, Jigger," said Clay. "Well, we might as well open the ball. We'll hit 'em from two sides, up street and down, with a couple of boys out back. Pete, this isn't any of yours or Jigger's chore, so you better lay low."

"That's what you think, me bhoy," retorted doughty little Jigger. "Don't you worry none about Pete and me. We got an idea or two, we have."

Clay and Jerry Hyatt moved off into the gloom. Jigger and Pete scuttled off also, two wrinkled gnomes of the night. They went into the back door of the Emporium, soon to reappear, lugging something between them with special care. Up the back way they trudged until they came to the alley which ran between the Humbug and the White Front Eating House.

"This," muttered Flood, "is going to raise hell, Jigger."

"Hope it puts a rock under it," growled Jigger. "Always I'm thinking of Bill Waller, and that settles it."

"We might burn the whole cussed town down," said Flood.

"Let her burn," snapped the implacable Jigger. "We're going to run a flock of coyotes out into the open. Here, gimme that stuff. I'll lay it."

Pete Flood shook his grizzled head. "We're both in on this. Come on."

THEY ducked into the blackness of the alley while, in the Humbug, the revelry was still going at full blast. Of all that motley, tough crowd, only Frisco Dan Drew seemed not to be enjoying himself. He stood at the far end of the bar, his black eyes cold, his face a dark mask over his thoughts.

In a lull, the bartender, Dumpy Kling, sweating and fatigued, sidled up to Drew.

"The thirstiest bunch I ever see, Boss," he mumbled. "This keeps up much longer and we're going to run low on likker. They lap it up like it was rain-water."

Drew's eyes flashed contempt. "Slop for the swine," he growled thinly. "Let 'em have it, Dumpy. A lot of them will be dead before this range is mine. Keep 'em drunk and happy until it's time for the big clean-up. Poor tools to work with, but a coyote is a coyote, Dumpy, whether you buy it or hire it. Yeah, let 'em have all they want. It will burn up their consciences, if any of them own to such a thing. And I'm going to need men without consciences or hearts."

Dumpy gulped and moved away. Whenever he got a glimpse of the savagery that had been consuming Drew lately, it scared him.

The renegades clamored at the bar. Raw whisky flowed, as Dumpy had said, like rain-water. The air of the place was hot, depressing, fetid. Tobacco smoke lay along the low ceiling like fog, blue and drifting, and through it the

hanging lamps shone dully, like drunken eyes.

A man darted in at the door. It was Spike Kirby. He stopped beside Drew.

"Garrison and his crowd are in town, Frisco!" he panted. "They're surroundin' this place. I recognized two or three of 'em!"

For a moment Drew stood stone still. Then he cursed savagely.

"And all my fighters as drunk as dogs. I might have guessed something—"

Whatever Frisco Drew intended to say was lost in the flat rumble of a shot. One of the lamps dissolved in a clatter of shattered glass and a spray of oil. Before any man could think or move that gun outside the door rumbled twice more and the other two lamps went to pieces.

For the moment the room was a black, stagnant pool of amazement and fear. Then came the roar of cursing, yelling voices, and the pound and trample of boots as the drunken crowd went berserk with stupefied fear.

Thin and harsh as steel, Frisco Drew's voice cut through the clamor.

"Stay inside, you fools!" They're laying for us outside. They'll shoot us to pieces."

Some of the more sober renegades heard, and began fighting the others away from the door. They managed to bring about a momentary quiet. And as they did, from out of the blackness of the street, the voice of Clay Garrison rang, harsh with purpose.

"You got one chance to surrender, Drew. Take it—or the consequences!"

The iron self-control of Frisco Drew broke. Always he had hated Clay Garrison, hated him because he knew in his heart that Clay Garrison was such a man as he could never hope to be himself; hated him because he knew that Clay Garrison's had been the mind behind his initial defeat in the conquest to make an empire for himself along the Buttonwillow; hated him because he knew that such a man as Clay Garrison might win the affection of a girl like Leigh Orde, while he, Frisco Dan Drew, never could. And lastly he hated Clay Garrison because he knew that Clay had not been fooled, not from the first, and that again he had outguessed him, trapped him.

All the vicious nature in Drew surged up and overflowed.

"Come and get us, if you think you can!" he yelled. "Before you do, you'll know what perdition is like! Come and get—"

The whole town shook before the roaring shock. A back corner of the Humbug seemed to lift and dissolve, while through the place where the walls had been drove a sheet of white, searing light. Soul-shattering concussion knocked men down as though they were matches. A giant, invisible hand lifted Frisco Drew clear off the floor and hurled him against an inner wall with crushing force. He sagged down, dazed and stupid with shock.

MEN screamed like animals. Then they fought each other madly to get away from the tongues of flame beginning to creep through the wreckage.

Someone fell across Drew, cursing savagely. Drew recognized the voice of Spike Kirby. He caught at Kirby and clung to him.

"Spike," he gasped thickly, "this is Drew. Help me out! The back way. We got something to do."

Kirby dragged Drew to his feet, pulled him along with one hand, while smashing with a clubbed gun with the other to clear a way through the frantic tangle. Somehow they located the rear door, stumbled through to the outer air.

Out in front of the Humbug, guns were snarling. A gun flashed not far from Kirby and a slug bit into the shattered wall behind him. Kirby shot back instinctively.

"Come on!" he snarled at Drew. "Run for it!"

Drew stumbled along behind Kirby, mechanically keeping his feet. His brain was still numbed from the shock and as he drew each gasping breath, knifelike pains shot through his chest.

As they passed that point of pale light thrown by the rising flames of the shattered corner, a voice cried out in startled amazement.

"Kirby! Drew!"

That was all staunch little Jigger Dugan had time to say before Spike

Kirby's gun crashed down on his head. Jigger wilted to the dark earth.

But the explosion of the dynamite which Jigger and Pete Flood had set off at the rear corner of the Humbug won the fight for the cattlemen almost before it started. Bewildered, terror-stricken renegades who charged out into the street like stampeded cattle, had little fight left in them. A few threw guns wildly, but cold-eyed men in the shadows, fighting for their own range, cut them down mercilessly.

Soon there was no more resistance. The cattlemen, under Clay Garrison's orders, disarmed the survivors and herded them off up the street.

Flames were roaring and leaping in the Humbug now. The place was doomed and Clay's fear was that the rest of the town might go with it.

"Jerry Hyatt!" he yelled. "You and Ben Cullop and a couple of others take care of those prisoners. Buck, get the rest of the boys and fight that fire. It's liable to take the whole town!"

"Coming up, Clay," yelled Buck. "We'll—"

The world shuddered again before another terrific rumble and roar, and another sheet of white light dissolved the night. But this was dynamite of another making. This explosion was the hoarse, crashing bellow of thunder, and that greenish white light was the awful lance of lightning. And hardly had the lightning gone and while the thunder echoes were still booming, when rain came down in a sheet.

Rain, torrents of it, a battering sheet of water which washed away the stifling heat, which cooled and flooded a parched and thirsty earth.

Clay Garrison stood rooted in his tracks. He lifted his face to the cool, lashing joyousness of that blessed rain. What matter that the thunder boomed anew and that the pallid ghost of lightning galloped here and yon across the heavens. Rain! It was raining! The touch of it and the breath of it cooled his blood, sweetened his throat, filled him with a new, exultant energy and hope.

Someone had him by the arm, shaking him. It was Buck, yelling joyously: "The drought's broken! Come on, you rain! Don't ever stop. And, Clay, it's putting out that fire!"

Clay came back to earth. He knew now what that strange sense of restless edginess had been this night. It had been the effect on human nerves of a world full of electricity which had waited overlong to be dissolved. And with that electricity, that gathering storm which had shut out the stars, had come this blessed rain.

CLAY shook his head, looked once more at the ruins of the Humbug. Buck was right. Already the flames were dying, flickering down under the roaring deluge from the sky. And someone was calling him, thinly, faintly—the voice of Jigger Dugan.

Clay found the little Irishman, tottering queerly. He caught Jigger by the arm, steadied him.

"Where you hit, Jigger?"

"I'm not shot," gasped Jigger. "It was Kirby—he gun-whipped me. And Drew was with him. They got out the back way and I bumped into 'em. Clay, lad, you'll be ridin', fast. How do I know where those two divils are goin'? I can't tell you, Clay, yet I'm knowin'. 'Tis the Irish of me, Clay. The R O Up and Down where that sweet lass will be, with only her wounded father—that is where they'll be heading for. Drew, that divil was crazed after that lass. With me own eyes I've seen him watch her, and I know. You'll be ridin' out there, Clay, ridin' fast. You'll be—"

Jigger went out again, sagging limply. Clay lowered him to the soaking earth, yelling sharply for help. Clay did not know that it was Skeet Farnell who came running. He only knew what Jigger had told him, and somehow he knew that Jigger was right.

"Take care of him," he growled to Skeet. "I've got riding to do."

He raced away into the swirling night. He found a horse and was away at a lashing gallop.

X

ALL THROUGH the rest of his life Clay knew he would remember this ride. There was something almost of destiny in it. If he won, he would win

all, or nearly all. And if he lost, then indeed would he lose everything.

The threat of Frisco Drew's dream of empire was shattered, just as the Humbug had been shattered by that charge of dynamite which Jigger and Pete Flood had set off, just as the drought had been shattered by that first roar of thunder.

When this rain ceased, the range which had been dead and burned and scorched would live again. Green grass would ripple and bend before the push of the four winds. The Buttonwillow would flow once more. Cattle would thrive and grow fat. The bounty of the earth and sky would enrich the lives of men. Yet all this would go for nothing if Drew and Kirby reached the R O Up and Down before Clay did.

Strange, Clay thought, that he did not question this premonition of Jigger Dugan's. Jigger was a queer, deep little cuss, with much of the mysticism of his race about him. Yes, Jigger knew, all right.

IT WAS black dark, out there on the range. There were no stars, nothing to guide by, yet Clay sent his mount instinctively on a dead line for the R O Up and Down. The tocsin of the thunder had moved south and east, grumbling in the distance like some discontented giant. But the drive of the rain had a settled permanence about it. It would last for a couple of days, at least.

Clay pushed his craggy face against the lash of the storm. He was drenched, soaked to the skin, but his lean, rock-hard body felt cooled and refreshed and strong. Underfoot the earth was already soggy. The churning hoofs of the horse never varried from a driving tempo. The rain, so magic was its touch on man and beast, made the bronc strong and wild to run.

Clay's thoughts reached ahead. In his mind's eye he could see Leigh Orde. She would be out on the porch, drinking in the sweet breath of the storm. The wet wind would be whipping tendrils of hair about her soft cheeks, and those cheeks would be dewy with rain mist.

Clay fought back the wistful longing of his thoughts. It would be Leigh and Buck, which was all right. After all, they would both belong to him. There were more ways to show your love for a girl than by the privilege of taking her in your arms. You could work for her and plan for her future and guard her against the buffets of the world. And Buck was his kid brother. You couldn't regret the good fortune and happiness of your kid brother. Yes, Leigh and Buck would be happy, and in their happiness he would find some reward for his own loneliness.

If he got there in time!

Clay's mood changed. Some of the old, hard savagery came back to him. He had to get there in time! Automatically he roweled his hard running mount and the horse plunged down a steep slope and Clay found wind-whipped alders and willow clumps all about him. It was the Buttonwillow. Already the river was running. Then the horse was into the rising flood, plunging belly deep, foaming along in short, heavy lunges.

Out and up the other side, with the warm, wet steam from the animal heavy and pungent in Clay's nostrils. A lashing, tearing gallop once more, rider leaning forward in the saddle, lifting the animal on. Leigh Orde was out there ahead—alone—caring for her crippled father. And somewhere in this drenched black world two human wolves were racing to hurt and maim and render all victory hollow and heart-breaking.

Abruptly through the blackness winked a pin-point of yellow light. The Orde ranchhouse.

All along Clay had heard nothing but the voice of the storm. The plunge and pound of hoofs on sopping earth would be muffled by the whipping wind. And if he had heard nothing of any other riders, it was fair to believe that they had heard nothing of him. His eyes, adjusted to the murk, strained to see ahead.

He passed the dim bulk of barns, feed sheds, corrals. The flare of light grew stronger, took rectangular shape, the shape of an open door. And there, silhouetted against the light stood a slim figure, seeming to lean forward, as though to embrace the sweet magic of the rain.

IT WAS Leigh, just as he had known she would be, tasting this blessed moisture which meant life to the range. And Clay, as he swung his mount to a halt, saw her suddenly give back, as a queerly humped figure took shape from the storm and lunged up the steps.

It seemed to Clay he could hear her cry of alarm, as that humped figure caught at her, held her. Clay struck the earth running, his eyes fixed on those two struggling figures limned against the light of the open door. He drew both guns, pushed them forward in tense fists.

Then, close beside him, loomed the bulk of two horses. A man snarled a startled curse. The blasting rumble of a gun sounded. A mighty blow struck Clay across the ribs, numbing him, sending his senses reeling. He almost went down. But he hadn't made this wild ride out here to go down before any man.

He drove two shots in return, slamming them at that finger of crimson flame which had lanced at him. He did not know that Spike Kirby died suddenly and abruptly, with one bullet through his body and another just above the bridge of his nose.

Clay fought off the deathly weakness which dragged at him. The job was only half done. He lurched on toward the steps, a strange hoarse sound blurting from his straining lips. The numbness of that first blow in his ribs was gone, but a terrible white fire burned there, a fire which seemed to be slowly consuming him.

Strong as Leigh Orde was in her wiry slenderness, she would ordinarily have been no match in strength for this queerly hunched, snarling animal of a man who was Frisco Drew. But Drew was maimed from the injuries he had suffered in the explosion that had wrecked the Humbug. When he had been smashed against the wall, ribs had been caved in, muscles wrenched and torn. Only his feral hate, the madness of every evil passion in him which had been loosed, had enabled him to ride as far as the Orde ranch. And now he found a blazing-eyed fury in this girl he meant to take with him as he rode away.

The coughing bellow of those three shots, just below the porch, broke through the veil of madness which consumed Frisco Drew. Warning jerked at his twisted brain. As he swung his head to look, the struggling girl tore an arm free and one clenched fist pounded against the side of Drew's head. The blow caught him off-balance, sent him staggering half down the steps.

Less than four strides away, Clay Garrison set his guns to snarling once more. Strange, he thought, how cut in half he felt. His mind, his head were icily clear. Yet his body seemed queerly useless. Only the indomitable, starkly savage purpose in his brain made his hands work with utter certainty.

Clay laced that wavering figure of Frisco Dan Drew with unerring lead, blasting the man through and through. Drew weaved from side to side, then fell backward, huddling limp and dead at the foot of the steps.

Clay dropped his guns. In slow, drag-

[*Turn page*]

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ging, uncertain strides he moved to the foot of the steps and slowly up them. He moved half across the porch, where the lamplight from the open door fell full upon him.

A stark figure he made, his soaked clothes molded to his powerful shoulders and chest. Slowly a smile touched his lips.

"Leigh," he said. "Little pardner. It—it's all right now. We win—all ways. Everything is all—right!

And then he went down, down, down . . . into a pit of roaring blackness. . . .

Clay Garrison came back to the world of the living after a long, long journey through pits of everlasting blackness. For days on end he had hovered in those depths while the flame of life burned so low that several times Doc Peets believed it had gone out altogether.

Doc Peets would have given up Clay more than once if it had not been for the tragic-eyed girl who worked beside him. For each time he despaired, Doc would look at her, read what was in her eyes, then return to the battle, fighting back at the leering spectre of death with every trick of science at his command.

Yet when the turn finally came, when that faint, flickering pulse grew slowly stronger and stronger, Doc knew it was not his ointments or his medicines that had won the fight. It was the unconsciously indomitable will of this wounded man to live, that and the faith of this girl beside him.

CAME a day when Doc Peets, worn and haggard and unshaven and near collapse himself, staggered out onto the porch, where a group of silent men had waited and waited. Buck Garrison, his young face turned old and lined with worry, looked up.

Doc Peets nodded. "He's going to live," he croaked. "The man's iron. Iron, I tell you. He's made a liar out of medical science. He's going to live, when by every rule in the book he should have been dead days ago. And now I got to sleep. I'm dead on my feet. Some of you had better see that that great little girl gets some rest, too. She's been magnificent. It's been something between her and Clay that's pulled Clay through, something stronger than death itself. Something that makes me feel small and useless and old. I've had the feeling all along that if he had died, she would have died, too. Gawd! I'm tired."

Men led the valiant little doctor away, undressed him and put him to bed, where he was asleep before they could cover him with blankets.

Buck Garrison and Jerry Hyatt tiptoed into the sick room. Clay lay there, a wasted shadow of his old self, but alive and with just the faintest tinge of precious color showing in his haggard cheeks. He was asleep. And in a chair beside him, Leigh Orde was also asleep.

As gently as he would have picked up a sleeping infant, Buck Garrison gathered her into his arms and he and Jerry Hyatt carried her into her own room and tucked her into bed. The eyes of both were wet as they left the house.

For twenty-four hours both Leigh and Clay slept. And now soft, mellow sunshine lay over the Buttonwillow range. Under its touch, green grass would soon be growing.

The rain had gone, but it had brought the life the range needed. Down under the nodding willows and alders, Buttonwillow River ran bank full with sparkling, sweet water. And no longer did the mournful, tragic complaint of cattle sound through every hour of the day and night.

It was not long before Clay Garrison was sitting up in bed. An open window was at his side and through it came the warm benediction of the sun.

Clay looked up as Leigh Orde came into the room. Buck followed her. And the younger brother grinned widely.

"Looking plenty chipper, you old wart hog. Feeling pretty fine, eh?"

Clay smiled and nodded. "Be glad to get out of this cussed bed. Never was so sick and tired of anything before in my life. Doc says I can sit on the porch next week. And maybe, by the end of the month I'll be able to sit a saddle again. How's things out on the range, kid?"

"Never better. Cattle fattening up in great shape. Here, give me your paw."

Buck took Clay's hand, caught one of Leigh's and pressed them together.

"There," he chuckled. "Knew I'd have to do that to make you two idiots understand. Bless you, my children."

CLAY stared. "Huh! Why—what . . . Say, listen—"

"You listen." Buck laughed softly. "You big-hearted old goat. You had it all planned out for Leigh and me, didn't you? And you never stopped to ask either of us. Time was when Leigh and me thought we were in love. But we found out different. Sure I love her, always will. She's the sweetest little sister any man could want. And she told me a while back that if I'd behave myself, not cuss too much, worked hard and minded my manners, she'd consider me as a brother. Which set-up suits both her and me fine. Now, seeing that I ain't needed around here any longer, I'll slope. There's calves to be branded and all kinds of work to be done by an ambitious gent like me."

Buck slipped out of the door and closed it softly. Leigh stood looking down at Clay. Those gray eyes of hers were soft, tender.

Clay cleared his throat. "I had it figured the other way round, Leigh," he said. "I thought is was Buck."

"So did I for a time," she admitted, with all her honesty and directness. "But I found out different, as Buck told you. When I heard how close you had come to being killed, that night when they tried to drygulch you, then I knew, Clay. I knew then that it had always been you. And right now I'm cold with terror that you may not think of me as I do of you."

Her voice grew softer and softer, then sank away entirely while she stood, one hand pressed to her throat, her eyes like misty stars.

Clay laughed joyously. "Look at me and find your answer, sweetheart."

Looking, Leigh knew, beyond all doubt. She gave a little sob and dropped down beside him, her hands framing his gaunt craggy face. And her head dropped lower until her lips, soft and warm and fragrant as the sunlight, came to rest on his.

Heading This Way for Our Next Issue!

DUST ACROSS THE RANGE

A Novel of Water Rights War by MAX BRAND

THE LOOT OF THE LAZY A

A Cultus Collins Novel by W. C. TUTTLE

BORDER BREED

A Novel of Gun Law by LESLIE ERNENWEIN

A boy, a dog and those amiable trouble-busters, Sad Sontag and Swede Harrigan, concoct a red-hot bowl of rustler stew!

"Don't move, gents!" said the voice of the sheriff of Oreana

I'LL KILL HIM, if it's the last thing I ever do!" yelped "Sad" Sontag.

"Quit it, I tell you!" wailed the bartender.

Swish! Crash!

"Aw-w-w-w, you danged fool!" The bartender's voice was raised in a crescendo. "Look what you went and done!"

Sad Sontag looked around solemly. His serious gray eyes considered the red-faced bartender, shifted to "Swede" Harrigan, his partner, then considered other interested customers in the saloon.

"Your darned heels knocked my glasses down," complained the bartender. "Didn't I tell you not to get up on my bar like that?"

Sad nodded. "I s'pose your did mention it."

"Mention, hell!" The bartender appealed to the crowd. "I'll leave it to any of you."

"You kind of overreached yourself, cowboy," observed Swede.

Sad squinted around, felt the back of his neck and shrugged his thin shoulders.

"Well, I s'pose I missed him," he said ruefully. "That's the first darned horsefly that ever bit me from behind and got away with it."

"Gettin' up on my bar and tryin' to hit a fly with a hat!" The bartender was justly indignant. "Balancin' on your knees on top of my bar and—"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Sad. "If you think that anybody is interested, hire a hall. I'll bet you've got a silvery voice, and all that, but not when you're mad. Right now it kind of creaks."

"I've got a right to kick, ain't I?"

Sad leaned against the bar, his old sombrero pulled down over his left eye, his shirt collar hiked up around his ears, and squinted reflectively at the irate bartender.

"All right." He nodded. "Go ahead. But, brother, let not your oration become personal. Keep from sayin' as much as possible. Proceed."

But the bartender's vocabulary seemed to have oozed away. He contented himself with picking up the glasses Sad's heels had smashed when he fell off the bar in his efforts to swat a horsefly.

Sad Sontag was as lean as a greyhound, bronzed as an Indian. His hair was a washed-out sandy color, with one long lock dropping over his forehead to join one of his arched eyebrows, giving him an astonished expression.

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Sad's shirt was of neutral shade, the color having long since faded from the sun and strong soap, his chaps worn and scarred, and his boot heels badly run over on the outer edges, which proved that Sad was bow-legged.

His cartridge belt was of extra width, fitting the curve of his hip and thigh, and from a scarred holster protruded the plain, black wood butt of a heavy Colt revolver.

Swede Harrigan, his partner, was a composite of Gaelic and Norse, a six-foot six-inch blond cowboy, with an Irish mouth and nose. His eyes were round and blue—patient-looking eyes, which belied the nose and mouth. His raiment was on a par with that worn by Sad, except that his boot heels were slightly run over on the inner side, which proved that Swede was a little knock-kneed in spite of the fact that he had spent most of his life in a saddle.

THEY were a nondescript pair, these two cowpunchers; neither handsome nor gaudy. An experienced cattleman would probably pick them out as top-hand cowboys, but as far as appearances went they were merely two ordinary cowhands.

They were joint owners of the TJ cattle outfit in the Sundown country, a hundred miles north of this town of Oreana. Oreana City, they called it, a cowtown of a hundred and fifty inhabitants, and the county seat of Pipestone County.

The bartender cooled down when he found that the damage was small, and offered to set up the drinks.

"Gimme a see-gar," said Sad.

"I'll burn my tongue, too," Swede nodded.

The bartender dug beneath the bar top and drew out a cigar box, which he dusted off and opened.

"Them," he said, tipping the box, "is what I call cigars. They costs me three dollars per hundred. Ain't much call for cigars here."

"Hadn't ought to be," agreed Swede. "Prob'ly be less after this."

"It don't do no good to wet 'em thataway," declared the bartender. "They won't stick."

Sad's cigar slipped from his fingers onto the floor, while Swede stumbled and broke his against the bar.

"I'll buy a drink," declared Sad, and added meaningly, "I hope you didn't try to make that stick."

"Aw-w-w-w, I didn't mean them cigars," protested the bartender. "I meant that I'd tried it with the ones I smoked."

"You get lucid too late," Swede said sadly. "I never did see a bartender that wasn't about forty minutes late."

"Yeah? Well, I wasn't always a bartender."

"Your work shows it," Sad grinned. "Well, here's how."

Swede grimaced and coughed.

"My gosh!" he gasped. "That's the first time I ever made a test-tube out of my insides. Hooh! I'll betcha that inside of fifteen minutes there won't be nothin' left of me except my ring and the case of my watch. Nitric acid!"

"Twenty years in the wood," declared the bartender.

"Ah-h-h-h-h!" Sad clung to the bar, gasping like a drowning man, his eyes closed painfully.

The bartender slid his drink beneath the bar and dumped it into the tub where he washed his glasses.

He sniffed at the bottles. "It seems to be all right," he said.

"Yeah, but it's got kind of a whisky taste," said Sad.

"My gosh, it is whisky!"

"It is?" Sad's eyebrows lifted incredulously. "Ah, no, it cannot be!"

"He says it straight enough," said Swede seriously.

He and Sad stared at each other wonderingly, turned together, stared at the bartender and went slowly out into the street. The bartender rubbed his chin and wondered what it was all about.

Sad and Swede walked up the sidewalk, their faces solemn until they looked at each other and burst into laughter.

"Now that poor bartender'll wonder whether we're crazy or he is," chuckled Sad. "Didja see him ditch his drink, Swede?"

"Did I? Ha! It's got a whisky taste!" Swede went into paroxisms of unholy glee.

They stopped near the entrance of a

"Glory to gosh!" whooped Speck. "Right in the ear!"

hall which led up to the county offices, and began perusing the notices tacked to the wall. Sad seemed interested in one particular notice which concerned a sheriff's sale.

"What day is this, Swede?" he asked.

"Monday, the seventh of August."

"Say, when did that feller tell us that this here sale was to be pulled off?"

"On the ninth."

"Well, he lied several days," complained Sad. "Here's the notice, which says it'll be the twelfth."

Swede squinted at the notice, which declared that on the twelfth day of August the sheriff of Pipestone County would sell at public auction everything belonging to the Bar S Ranch. The sheriff had drawn a design of the brand, a letter S, with a straight bar over the top.

"I reckon some of these Oreana folks can't read, so he has to draw a pitcher of it," Swede grinned. "Dang it, that makes it kinda bad for us, Sad. What'll we do?"

Sad squinted dismally.

"I don't know. I don't care to live in this place for long, but we came here to see what we could buy at that sale,

so we might as well see it through."

"It's all right with me, if we can find somethin' to do around this town."

"The first thing we better do is to put them broncs in a stable and find us a place to stay."

AS THEY turned away from the bulletin board a yellow dog shot around the corner, yelping, while behind it, tied securely to its tail, bounded a tin can.

For a fraction of a second the yellow dog hesitated, then it headed straight for Sad and Swede. Its speed was such that afterward Swede swore that something drew a yellow streak from his feet to the corner, then rubbed it out.

At any rate the dog, running blindly, attempted to go between Swede's slightly knock-kneed legs, and Swede flipped upside down, while the tin can whipped around his ankle, snapping the twine cord. The yellow dog streaked away up the street, leaving Swede on his hands and knees, swearing.

Following the dog came a boy of about twelve, his freckled face streaked with dusty tears, his rusty hair rumpled belligerently. He stopped and looked at Swede, who was untangling the cord from around his foot. Sad grinned at the youngster, who came closer, crooking his neck to look past them.

"Where'd Boze go?" he drawled.

"Was that Boze?" asked Sad.

"Yeah." The kid scratched one of his bare feet.

"You oughtn't to tie cans on your dog," said Swede.

"Aw-w-w, hell!" The youngster spat drily and hitched up his ragged overalls. "I never done it. It was some of them dad-durned square-heads from the Box Eight. By grab, if I ever get big enough I'll sure tie off to one of them pelicans and yank real hard."

"Aw, shucks!" Sad grew sympathetic. "Somebody pickin' on you, Bud?"

"Yeah—but my name ain't Bud. I'm Percival Cadwallader Steeb. Mostly everybody calls me Speck Steeb. And" —"Speck" sighed dismally and wiped his cheeks—"I ain't havin' good luck."

"Ain't you, Speck?" queried Swede.

"Nope. Me and Boze ran away from that durned Box Eight outfit."

"Are you livin' there, or just punchin' cows for 'em?" asked Sad.

"Aw, I ain't big enough to be a hand yet. They thought I was livin' there, but I ain't. And by the busted tail of a longhorn steer, I ain't goin' to live there neither. I'm through."

"A feller like you ought to pick and choose," Swede said, nodding.

An old man drove up and got out of his wagon in front of a store. His equipage consisted of a rickety buckboard and a pair of mismated horses. He was little short of seventy years of age, with a long, white beard and white hair. His face was seamed deeply and colored like an old parchment, which only accentuated the white of his beard and hair.

Three cowpunchers rounded the corner beyond the store and went inside, while the old man followed them in. Speck scowled at the three punchers.

"Them punchers is the jiggers from the Box Eight that tin-canned Boze," he informed. "Took all three of 'em to hog-tie me, you betcha. That old man in the wagon is Eph Wyatt. He can whip his weight in anything you want to mention."

"Pretty old to be fightin', ain't he?" ventured Sad.

"Well, I don't know. Pa said that old Eph gets fightener every year."

Sad laughed and patted the youngster on the shoulder.

"Some folks are that way, Speck," he said. "Where is your father?"

Speck's eyes suddenly filled with tears and he shoved both hands down deep in his pockets. Sad and Swede exchanged a quick glance, as Speck looked up at them and said:

"Well, you see, he—he's dead now."

"Aw, gosh!" exploded Sad mournfully. "Speck, we didn't know about that."

"Oh, thas all right." Speck smiled through his tears. "Folks never learn nothin' unless they ask questions. My dad owned the Bar S Ranch."

"Oh, yeah." Sad nodded thoughtfully. "Well, ain't you got no relations, Speck? Nobody to look after you?"

"No-o-o," Speck sighed deeply. "Anyway, I don't know of any. Pa wasn't

much for relations. Lot of these folks around here got to tryin' to figure out what to do with me, and I'll bet some of 'em won't get the cramps out of their brains for a year. Bill Wyatt says he can use a boy about my size out at the Box Eight, so they send me out there. Bill's that old man's nephew, but he's owner of the Box Eight. I stayed two days, and I'll tell a man I worked. Whooee! Bill hates Boze. Bill hates everything, I reckon. He run Boze off the ranch twice, but Boze comes back every time. Then Bill tells me to run the dog off the ranch and keep him off, so I run Boze plumb down here where" —Speck grinned wisely—"I can keep us both off."

"And then they come down here and tin-can the dog, eh?" said Swede.

"Sure did. But Boze'll come back."

"That's all right, but what about you?" asked Sad.

"Don't nobody need to worry about me," assured Speck.

"Uh-huh." Sad scratched his head thoughtfully. He admired the independent attitude of the youngster.

"I'll get along," remarked Speck. "All I ask is that they leave me and Boze alone. . . . There's the little son-of-a-gun now!"

II

VENTURING back to the corner beyond the store, Boze was peering around into the street. Speck whistled to the dog, and it ran to meet him. Sad and Swede grinned at each other and walked to the store entrance, while the boy and dog romped up the street.

"Somebody's hot under the collar," observed Swede, at sounds of an argument from within the store.

"I tell yuh, I don't want him around!" It was Bill Wyatt, a thin-faced, buck-toothed cowboy, speaking. He spat savagely and accurately at a sawdust-filled box.

"It was your own idea, Bill," said Al Weller, the big storekeeper.

"Yeah." Bill nodded. "But I thought he'd be worth somethin'. Hell, he won't work!"

Old Eph Wyatt squinted at his nephew.

"You wasn't payin' him no wages, was you, Bill?"

"Not so you could notice it."

"You can hire full-grown men for forty a month, and you might remember that the kid ain't more'n twelve years old."

"I was givin' him a home," retorted Bill.

"You wasn't givin' him nothin'. He had to earn one."

"There's no use quarrelin'," said the storekeeper quickly.

"I'm not quarrelin'," said the old man. "The poor kid got a tough deal all around. I liked Jim Steeb. He was a fool to drink himself to death and throw the kid into a community that's got more kids than they know what to do with. Bill had an idea that he could get some cheap labor, I reckon. I ain't sayin' a little work will hurt any kid, but a youngster oughtn't to have to work twelve hours per day for his bed and three meals."

"I don't know why you're hornin' into this," declared Bill.

His uncle squinted at him so closely he shifted uneasily.

"You didn't think I cared to explain, did you?" asked the old man slowly. "I ain't never been in the habit to apologizin', have I?"

"That's all right, Eph." The storekeeper was a trifle anxious.

"Well, I don't care what you do." Bill shrugged and threw some silver on the counter. "Gimme some smokin' and papers, Al."

As he pocketed the articles, Speck and Boze came in. The dog slouched at the boy's heels, recognizing its enemies, but Speck was unafraid. The men had noticed Sad and Swede, but had not paid much attention to a pair of strange cowboys.

"That dog don't know when to get insulted," Bill laughed.

"You let that dog alone," said Speck firmly. "He ain't never done nothin' to you, Bill Wyatt."

Bill laughed and started for Boze. The dog darted back toward the door, barking snappily.

"You let that dog alone!" shrilled Speck again, blocking Bill. "By golly, some day I'll be big enough—"

Bill's open palm splatted against his ear, sending him sideward into the counter, and Bill started toward the frightened dog.

"You oughtn't to do that." Sad Sontag stepped between Bill and the dog. There was no threat in Sad's voice nor actions. He was smiling with his mouth, but his eyes were serious.

"Hadn't, eh?" Bill stopped and looked Sad over curiously, the first time he had even seen this cowpuncher.

He turned and looked at Swede, who was lounging easily against a counter, paying no attention to Sad, because his entire attention was centered on the two men who had come in with Bill Wyatt.

Bill's eyes came back to Sad.

"What's the idea of you hornin' into this?" he demanded.

"I ain't hornin' in." Sad smiled. "I'm just tellin' you."

Boze seemed to realize that the immediate danger was over, so he came over and sniffed at Sad's boots. Speck had regained his feet, and was busily rubbing a red ear. Bill looked back at his two men and found their attention on Swede.

"And," said Sad softly, "any man that would slap kids and tie cans on a pup's tail is a low-bred coyote."

The storekeeper ducked behind the counter, and the old man edged slowly out of line. Bill Wyatt was deadly with a six-shooter, and there could be but one answer to that insult.

Still Bill Wyatt did not move. His half-closed eyes looked into the wide-open gray ones of Sad Sontag. They seemed to hypnotize him. Neither made any motion toward a gun.

"A feller that would hit a kid ain't got the nerve to fight." Sad's voice was pitched low, but carried clearly. "You might fight, if you was in a corner—but I doubt it."

But Bill Wyatt did not move. Sad inched toward him, coming closer and closer. One of Bill's men swore wonderingly. They could not see Bill's face.

SUDDENLY Sad's left hand shot out, grasped the brim of Bill's sombrero and yanked it down over Bill's eyes. It was done so quickly that Bill did not have time to jerk away. He stumbled forward.

But the hypnotic spell was broken. Bill ripped out an oath as he flung back the hat and flipped out his gun. But the barrel of Sad's struck him across the right wrist, forcing him to drop his gun. The next instant he measured his full length under the table.

"Glory to gosh!" whooped Speck. "Right in the ear!"

Bill's two men had not moved, for the simple reason that the blond Swede still leaned against the counter, dangling a big six-shooter in his right hand, his lips pucked in a whistle, while his round blue eyes never wavered.

Sad kicked Bill's gun aside and waited for him to get up. But Bill was in no hurry. He slid from under the table, rubbing his swelling ear.

"You know now how it feels to get hit in the ear, don't you?" chuckled Speck. "Maybe next time you'll have a little sense."

Bill got slowly to his feet and walked out of the store. Abe Snow and "Snipe" Lee, his two men, followed him. They gave Swede a wide berth in passing.

"And thus endeth that chapter," said Sad, smiling.

"Maybe not," said old Eph Wyatt dubiously. "My nephew Bill won't forget it for a mighty long time, stranger."

"Memories has caused a lot of folks to lose their minds," said Sad, rumpling Speck's hair and feeling of his ear.

"Aw, it don't hurt now," protested Speck. "The wallop you gave Bill Wyatt cured me. Whooee, I'll bet he's sore!"

A man was coming into the store, but turned to look across at the hitchrack, where the three men from the Box 8 were mounting. It was "Buck" Rainey, the sheriff, a short, heavy-set individual, with a yellow mustache and squinty eyes.

"You missed a circus, Buck," said Eph Wyatt, whose feelings in regard to his nephew were well-known. "Bill just got knocked cold."

"Yeah?" The sheriff elevated his eyebrows. "How come, Eph?"

The old man laughed and detailed the story, while the sheriff considered Sad and Swede.

"And he popped him right in the

ear!" added Speck jubilantly.

"Uh-huh." The sheriff scratched his nose thoughtfully. "It's a wonder that Bill didn't start shootin'."

"It's got me beat," said the storekeeper. "He just stood and took it. I don't *sabe* Bill."

"Is he supposed to be a bad man?" asked Sad.

"Well," drawled the sheriff, "a feller don't have to be so awful darned bad to reach for a gun at a time like that."

"I don't think he's got brains enough to know when he's been insulted." Swede laughed.

"Maybe not." The sheriff grinned. "But Bill is usually the one to start trouble."

"Maybe I packed it to him too fast," said Sad. "You're the sheriff, ain't you?"

"Yeah."

"I'm Sontag. My pardner's name is Harrigan. We own a ranch in the Sundown country, and we're down here to see what we can buy at the Bar S sale."

"Oh, yeah. Pleased to meet you. Bar S sale, eh? Uh-hu-u-uh. What did you figure on buyin'?"

"Maybe a few head of stock. We heard that there was quite a bunch of cattle and horses."

"Yeah? Well, it won't be held until the twelfth."

"That's all right. We got some wrong information and came down too soon."

The sheriff turned to Eph Wyatt and the storekeeper.

"I've been wonderin' what we're goin' to do with this kid." He nodded at Speck, who was perched on a counter. "Bill said he'd take care of him, but that's all off now, I suppose."

"I wish you'd quit worryin' about me," said Speck. "I ain't askin' for nothin' but a job. I can work my way."

"You ain't big enough to work," declared the sheriff. "Your place is in school."

"How'd you like to work for me?" asked the old man.

"I don't know." Speck wriggled his toes. "Me and you'd prob'ly get along fine, Mr. Wyatt. Dad said you was the fightenest son-of-a-gun he ever seen—and I like to fight, too."

The old man laughed softly and walked over to Speck.

"Fightin' don't get you much, Speck. I'm all alone on that old ranch out there, and I sure need somebody to help me. Suppose you come out and live with me."

"Well—" Speck hesitated. "Well, I'll do it."

"He ain't big enough to do much work," said the sheriff.

"No, and he won't have much to do," said Eph Wyatt. "If me and him gets along all right, I—I'll adopt him accordin' to law."

"You'll adopt him?"

"I sure will. Ain't no law ag'in it, is there, Buck?"

"What does adoptin' mean?" asked Speck.

"Takin' out papers to make you the same as my son," explained the old man.

"Yea-a-a-ah?" Speck's eyes widened. "What about Boze?"

"Well, he comes along," agreed the old man. "We won't need no papers for the pup. C'mon."

THE old man started for the door, with the boy and the pup close behind him. At the doorway Speck turned and came back to Sad, holding out his hand.

"Much obliged, Mr. Sontag," he said. "Hope to meet you again."

"You're sure welcome, Speck." They shook hands. "I hope your luck has turned."

"She's beginnin' to bend a little," said Speck. "S'long."

They watched the boy climb up on the seat beside the old man, while Boze danced around in the rear of the buckboard and barked his approval of the equipage.

"Well, I hope it works out all right," said the sheriff. "It was hard to know what to do with that kid."

"What killed his father?" asked Swede.

"Liquor. He spent most of his time at the Oreana Saloon. Too danged bad. Jim Steeb wasn't a bad sort of a feller. His wife died a year ago, and it kind of ruined him. This ain't exactly a sheriff's sale. Bunty O'Neil, who owns the Oreana Saloon, has enough of Steeb's notes to probably cover everything on

the Bar S."

"Steeb just drank up his ranch, eh?" queried Sad.

"Uh-huh. There may be a little over, after O'Neil gets paid, but I doubt it. I've got three men in the hills now, roundin' up the Bar S stock."

"What sort of a person is Bill Wyatt?"

"Bill? Well, he's kind of touchy, and ain't noways honey-flavored. He owns the Box Eight outfit and runs quite a lot of stock. Old Eph Wyatt is his uncle. Old Eph is a cantankerous old reptile, but he's good-hearted. I don't know how him and the kid will hit it off together."

"Is Bill Wyatt married?"

"Naw."

"Owned the Box Eight long?"

"Couple of years."

"Buy out a brand, or register his own?"

"Registered his own. Used to be the Eight outfit, so he changed it to the Box Eight . . . Say, what's the idea of all these questions?"

"Curiosity, Sheriff." Sad laughed. "Nice weather we're havin'."

"Uh-hu-u-uh."

The sheriff left and walked down the street toward the office, where three men were dismounting, while Sad and Swede went looking for a home for a few days.

III

"BUNTY" O'NEIL of the Oreana Saloon could not be called exactly a lovable character. He was of medium height, thick of neck and broad of shoulder. His face was blocky, expressionless, swarthy—a hard-headed individual, whose bunting practice in a fight had given him his nickname. He would grasp an opponent with his huge hands, yank him forward and butt him with his head. Only in rare cases did Bunty fail to put his opponent *hors de combat.* Only when Bunty's system was well-known.

Bunty had once worked it successfully on Bill Wyatt. When Bill had waked up he had found that both of his eyes were of a purple tint and did not admit much light. He had waited for the swelling to go down, had walked up behind Bunty in the Oreana Saloon and crowned him with the barrel of a six-shooter.

Bunty had had six stitches taken in his scalp, and had sent word to Bill Wyatt to keep out of the Oreana. Bill had. This had been six months ago and Bill had never been in the place since. Yet it was Bill who had induced Bunty to come to Oreana and buy out the Oreana Saloon and gambling house.

The day after Sad and Swede had come to Oreana, Bunty and the sheriff were standing on the porch of the saloon, talking seriously.

"You say they brought in three hundred and ten head?" asked Bunty.

The sheriff nodded. "Yeah. They're in the old pasture at the Bar S. The boys have gone down into the lower ranges now, but they won't be able to round up everything for a couple days."

Bunty smiled contentedly. "Three hundred and ten head, eh? Maybe I'll get my money after all, Buck?"

"I reckon you will, Bunty. For gosh sake, how much money did Jim Steeb owe you, anyway?"

Bunty grinned and shook his head.

"Jim plunged quite a lot, Buck. His whisky bill ain't more than a few hundred, but his faro and poker playin' cost money. I reckon the notes he gave me will come close to ten thousand."

The sheriff whistled his amazement.

"As much as that, Bunty? Huh! It seems too darned bad. Jim didn't leave a darned thing for the kid. Old Eph Wyatt is goin' to adopt him, I think."

"Old Eph?" Bunty laughed. "Goin' to adopt him, eh? Well, well!"

Sad and Swede came out of the hotel and sauntered toward the general store.

"They tell me that one of them fellers took a fall out of Bill Wyatt," Bunty said thoughtfully.

"The skinny one. His name is Sontag and the other is Harrigan. They're down here to buy some stock at the sale. Seem like a salty pair. Sontag tells me they own a ranch in the Sundown country."

"Well, all I care about it is to get my money out of the deal, Buck."

As they went into the saloon, Sad and Swede followed them inside. The sheriff

greeted them warmly and introduced the owner of the Oreana.

"You interested in the Bar S sale?" asked Bunty.

Sad nodded. "Kinda. We're lookin' for some stock, and thought this might be a chance to buy some reasonable. 'Course we don't want a lot of runts."

"We might take a ride out to the Bar S this evenin'," suggested the sheriff. "The boys threw three hundred and ten head into the pasture last night. You might look 'em over."

"We'd appreciate the chance," agreed Sad.

They spent the rest of the day loafing in the shade, and did not start for the Bar S until late in the afternoon. They found the ranch buildings badly in need of repair, but it was easy to see that at one time the Bar S had been considerable of a ranch.

There was no one at the place, and the sheriff explained that there had been no one in charge since the death of Steeb. They rode out past the corrals and on to a knoll that furnished a view of the Bar S pasture of about a hundred acres.

But there were no cattle in sight. The sheriff squinted around wonderingly.

"'S funny," he muttered. "They were here last night."

"You sure this is the place?" asked Swede.

"I'm as sure as anything," replied the sheriff and urged his horse off the knoll.

They rode to the lower end of the pasture, where they found that the barb-wires had been cut, and about a hundred feet ripped off the posts.

"They knew how to do it," observed Sad. "They cut the wires, bunched the ends, tied 'em to a rope and just rode 'em loose."

"And let the whole herd drift," observed the sheriff. "Well, that's plumb meanness, I'd say."

Sad looked at the sheriff and grinned. "Sheriff, do you think that they just turned them cows loose?"

"Eh?" The sheriff's eyebrows lifted. "You don't think that anybody would try to rustle a herd like that, do you?"

"Why not?"

"Well, you can't get away with that many. Anybody would be a fool to try and steal a herd like that."

"All right." Sad grinned widely and turned his horse. "You know the morals of this country better than we do."

THEY rode back to Oreana and stabled their horses. The sheriff was thoughtful during the ride, but could hardly bring himself to believe that anyone would steal three hundred and ten head of cattle in one herd.

"I think that someone is just doin' it to be mean," he declared.

"And I think they're doin' it for profit," Sad said firmly.

The sheriff imparted the story to Bunty O'Neil, who swore and questioned them all closely. The sheriff told Bunty what he thought about it, but Bunty did not agree.

"They've had about twenty-four hours' start," he observed. "And you can move a big herd a long ways in that length of time. It's so dry in the hills that you couldn't trail a herd, so the best you can do is trust to luck."

"It kind of looks like we might as well go home," observed Swede. "If there ain't no cows for sale."

Bunty's eyes grew hard as he leaned on the bar and toyed with his glass. The sheriff cleared his throat and sent his own glass spinning down the bar.

"Bunty has got a lot of notes against the Bar S," he explained. "And if there ain't no cows—Bunty loses."

"That's the how of it, eh?" said Sad.

"Yeah," said Bunty angrily. "And I'll get them cows—or get somethin'."

"You've got sort of an idea who took 'em, ain't you?" asked Sad.

"How would I?" snapped Bunty.

"I don't know—I'm no mind reader." Sad walked away from the bar and grew interested in a poker game.

Bunty looked after him, an angry glint in his eyes, but said nothing until Swede walked away.

"What did he mean, Buck?" he then asked.

The sheriff shook his head. "I don't know. I hope the boys show up tomorrow, but I'm scared they won't. We've got to try and find them missin' cattle. I don't believe yet that anybody had the nerve to steal a herd that big."

The sheriff left the saloon, but Bunty

remained at the bar, drinking his own liquor. It was not often that Bunty drank heavily. Liquor made him quarrelsome. Several patrons had their drinks served at a table when they realized that Bunty was on a spree.

Bunty motioned the bartender closer.

"What did that skinny puncher mean?" he demanded.

"I don't know what he said, Bunty. Personally, I think he's crazy. The fool fell off the bar yesterday, tryin' to hit a horsefly with his hat. And they said there was whisky in the drinks we served here. What are they—e-vangelists?"

Bunty grunted an oath and reached for the bottle. Sad and Swede were heading for the door. Bunty stepped in front of Sad and invited them to drink with him.

"You ain't in no hurry, are you?" he growled.

"Not a bit," Sad said, with his familiar grin.

"I'm glad you aint—'cause you'd stop anyway."

Sad glanced keenly at Bunty. He realized that the saloon owner was angry about something, and that he might be a hard man to handle.

"I'm not buyin' you any drinks after all," Bunty informed them harshly. "I only buy drinks for my friends."

"Then have a drink on me," suggested Sad.

"No, I won't do that, either." Bunty moved in closer to Sad. "I want to know what you meant by that remark a while ago—about you not bein' a mind reader."

"Oh!" Sad squinted thoughtfully. "Well, I'm not, Bunty. I'll leave it to Swede if I am."

"You'll leave nothin' to nobody! Come here!"

Bunty grasped Sad by the shoulder, sinking his powerful fingers deeply into the flesh. It was the prelude to crashing the top of his head into Sad's face—and Sad realized it.

But Bunty did not work fast enough. With a sudden shift of his feet, Sad kicked Bunty in the shins so hard that the man forgot everything except the excruciating pain. He reached for his shins just in time to get Sad's fist square in his nose, with the full swinging weight of the wiry cowpuncher behind it.

The blow straightened Bunty back on his heels, and before he could catch his balance Sad was smashing with both hands to the head. Bunty went reeling across the room, to crash into the back of a poker player's chair and go flat on his back.

At least a dozen men had seen the whole affair. They had expected Bunty to butt the face almost off this thin cowpuncher and end the fight to suit himself. But they had reckoned without Sad Sontag, who now was standing against the bar, blowing on his sore knuckles and grinning.

A COUPLE of men picked Bunty up and half-dragged him to the rear of the room, where they could wash him off. The poker player adjusted his chair and the games went on.

Sad and Swede went back to the hotel, where Sad procured some hot water in which to bathe his swollen right hand. Swede became pessimistic.

"Aw, let's go home," he argued dismally. "You've whipped both of their best fighters. This here town kinda palls upon me, Sad, and I'd crave to ride home."

"I've had a pretty fair time," said Sad seriously. "I s'pose Bunty was aimin' to butt me in the face, wasn't he?"

"That's his style," agreed Swede wearily. "There ain't no cows to be bought, so we might as well start home tomorrow."

"It's funny about them stolen cows," observed Sad, as he stretched out on the bed and began rolling a cigarette. "I'll bet anythin' Bunty knows who stole 'em. Somebody knows that Bunty has notes against the Bar S, so they crimped his chances to collect by stealin' the whole danged herd. Somebody hates Bunty a lot, Swede. It ain't no little job to steal three hundred head of cattle."

"You think they'll have enough stock for us to wait for the sale?"

"You never can tell." Sad blew smoke rings at the dingy ceiling. "I've got a hunch they won't. Tomorrow we'll find out more about it, and if it don't look more promisin' we'll rattle our hocks

out. I've had all the fightin' I want."

"We might ride out past old Eph Wyatt's place," suggested Swede. "I'm curious about that kid. Somehow I've got a hunch he ain't had a square deal."

"Just how do you mean, Sad?"

"Aw, just kind of mind readin', I reckon."

IV

AT Eph Wyatt's ranchhouse the following morning Speck Steeb, the freckle-faced boy, leaned against the doorway and rubbed a sore jaw. Sitting on the step was old Eph Wyatt, cleaning a Winchester rifle. The dog, Boze, chased a rooster across the yard, his mouth filled with feathers.

The old man stuffed cartridges into the loading gate, levered a shell into the chamber of the rifle and handed it to Speck, who took it gingerly and squatted down on the step.

"Pull a little finer, son," advised the old man. "Them last two shots went six inches high."

Speck cuddled the stock against his shoulder. The old man's eyes squinted closely at Speck's trigger finger, which tightened slowly, surely.

The big caliber rifle shook Spec from head to heels, and down by the stable a tin can flipped off a corral post and went spinning into the brush. Spec blinked painfully, but a grin wreathed his lips when he noted that the can was not on the post.

"Pretty good!" chuckled the old man. "Pretty good!"

"Pretty good, hell!" snorted Speck indignantly. "That's perfect."

"Yeah," agreed the old man. "Any old time a kid can hit a tin can at a hundred yards with a forty-five-ninety, it's a little better than perfect. How's the shoulder?"

"Just like a blamed boil. I never knew a rifle could kick thataway."

"And you squeezed the trigger, too," applauded the old man. "You knew it was goin' to kick, but you had the nerve to pull slow. Speck, me and you are goin' to get along. Well, that ends the first lesson."

The old man put the gun in the house and came back to the porch.

"We're goin' to town," he decided. "We'll hook onto a lawyer feller and have him fix up the papers—if you don't mind, Speck."

Speck rubbed his shoulder reflectively. "You mean the papers that make me as your son?"

"Yeah."

Speck looked up at the old man thoughtfully. "Why are you doin' this, Mr. Wyatt? I ain't nothin' to you."

The old man looked out across the hills, shading his eyes from the sun. "Well, maybe it's 'cause I kind of like you, son. I'm gettin' old, and livin' alone don't make you stay young. I ain't got no livin' relation, except Bill Wyatt, and"—he hesitated before he looked down at Speck—"I've always been quite a hand for relatives."

"And that's all the reasons you got, Mr. Wyatt?"

"That's all I care to speak about."

Speck bobbed his head wisely. "Well, I can stand it, if you can." He held out his hand. "Shake, pardner."

They shook hands gravely. It was a solemn pact between two of the fightenest sons-of-guns in the Oreana country.

They went to the stable, harnessed the mismated horses to the old buckboard and drove up to the house, where the old man got the rifle and leaned it against the seat between them. As they drove away the old man looked back at the house.

"Speck," he said, "I reckon we'll have to fix up the old place a little now. I've let her drift for the last few years, 'cause there wasn't no object in havin' it handled right. I've got a right smart of cows in them hills. When I need money I sell a handful of critters. This here Diamond W has got the best water-holes in this country, and it could be made into a fine ranch. The old house needs fixin' and the barn's swaybacked. Some day a wind will come along and blow the corral away, I s'pose. But we'll fix her all up now. We'll show 'em, eh, son?"

"Danged right." Speck nodded.

They drove down through a brushy swale and around the point of a ridge, where a long line of cottonwoods angled up through a narrow canyon. The road

was rutty and the horses were traveling at a slow walk when the larger of the animals lurched sideward and went down in a tangle.

The report of a rifle broke the stillness. The other horse reared wildly, swung over the body of its mate and fell back against the buckboard, squealing and kicking. The shock caused Speck to stand up, clinging to the back of the seat, and the old man picked him up and hurled him bodily into a clump of brush beside the road.

And while Speck was still in the air the old man grasped the rifle and started to jump, but a bullet shocked him heavily and he went down, falling just outside the wheels. Boze had jumped from the rear of the buckboard and scuttled into the brush.

SPECK landed in the brush head-first, but managed to extricate himself quickly and crawl back to the old man, whose hair and beard were already dyed with crimson. Spec's eyes were wide with fright, but his jaw was clenched tightly, as he clawed the rifle from between the wheels and ducked back into the brush.

"Bushwhacked, by jing!" he panted.

He remained quiet long enough to calm his breathing. One horse was dead, the other down in a tangle of harness, unable to get up. From where Speck squatted he was unable to see anything of the surrounding country, so he crawled back through the brush to higher ground.

He felt sure the bushwhacker had been hidden in that line of cottonwoods, and that they, or he, would try and get a close view of the buckboard. Working further up the side of the swale he found a spot which gave him a fairly good view of the surrounding country, although he could not see the buckboard. He could see Boze down the road, hunting for gophers.

Suddenly he saw two riders emerge from a thicket on the right-hand side of the cottonwoods. They were going cautiously, and intent on seeing what was down the road. The brush was horse-high, so the boy was unable to identify their horses.

They were about three hundred yards away when Speck raised the sights on his rifle and rested it across a limb. It did not occur to him that he was about to shoot at a human being. They had shot his benefactor. He flinched from the pressure of the rifle butt against his sore shoulder, but he gritted his teeth and muttered:

"Squeeze, dang you—don't yank!"

The big rifle crashed and the black powder fumes drifted back into Speck's wide-open mouth. He coughed slightly and dropped lower, grimacing disgustedly.

"You yanked!" he said aloud in self accusation. "You darned fool, you yanked. Why didn't you squeeze? Yanked, and jerked the sight plumb off to the right."

He could not see the two riders now, but he felt sure that the smoke from his shot had disclosed his hiding place, so he began crawling further up the canyon, going toward where he had seen the riders.

Speck was wise enough to be fairly certain they would not expect him to come toward them. He gained the cottonwoods and waited. There was not a sound, except the rustling of the trees. Far up the canyon a magpie squawked, sounding almost human.

Speck ducked low and followed the trees, stopping every few yards to listen. Then he left the cottonwoods and made his way around through the brush. He, too, wanted to get a view of the buckboard.

Suddenly he stopped short, his mouth open in amazement. He had found the two horses! They had been left in a choke-cherry thicket, almost in the same spot at which Speck had shot. He worked his way past the horses, but was unable to get a glimpse of the road.

"Ding-dang such luck!" he rumbled. "Feller never knows what will happen next in this Western country." He had heard his father use that expression many times, and it seemed applicable. "Well," he decided philosophically, "the least I can do is get help."

He went back to the horses, selected a blaze-faced roan, and managed to get into the saddle, but lost his rifle in the attempt. Cautiously he worked the horse back through the brush, swung

along the side of the hill for about a quarter of a mile before turning back toward the road.

He managed to get his feet hooked in above the stirrups, which gave him a secure seat in the saddle and, with his rusty hair standing almost on end and his skinny elbows beating a tattoo on his ribs, he headed swiftly toward Orena.

Meanwhile down at the buckboard stood Sad and Swede, looking down at old Eph Wyatt, propped against a wheel. The old man's face and beard were streaked with gore, which he mopped away with Sad's handkerchief.

"Think it's deep enough to amount to anything?" asked Swede.

"Don't hurt much," said the old man. "I feel kind of numb, that's all. That was a close call, gents. It bumped me so darned hard I never even knowed when it hit."

"Where do you reckon the kid went?" queried Sad.

"I don't know. I throwed him into the brush after the team went down."

"Probably high-tailed," said Swede.

"Not that kid." The old man spoke with conviction. "Speck ain't the runnin' kind. And he took the rifle . . . Say I don't think I'm hurt much." He got to his feet and clung to the wheel. "Kind of dizzy and my head aches. Gettin' too old to stand many tunks on the head like that."

"Got any idea who shot you?" asked Sad.

"Nope."

SAD nodded seriously. "We can start by eliminatin' your friends," he said. "Who hates you the worst?"

"The worst?" Old Eph shrugged painfully. "Well, you see, I ain't got no friends, so you don't need to eliminate anybody. I wish I knew where that kid went. If anybody hurts him I'll sure make 'em run fast and jump high as a kite."

"You've got two good little assistants, old-timer," assured Sad. "We like Speck, too. Do you want to find out who shot you?"

The old man laughed wearily. "You're danged right I do."

"All right," said Sad. "Maybe we can find out, if we work fast. Swede, go and collect the horses."

While Swede went after the horses Sad untangled the uninjured horse and helped it to its feet. But he did not unhitch it. Swede came back riding Sad's bay horse, and carrying Eph Wyatt's rifle.

"My bronc was gone," he told them, "and they left this here rifle in its place."

Sad rubbed his nose. "Looks like the work of a pack-rat, Swede. They always trade somethin'." He turned to the old man. "Speck's all right. He just outsmarted us, that's all, and swiped a horse. We've got to hurry before Oreana descends upon us, and we've only got one piece of rollin' stock, so you get aboard, old-timer."

"Shucks, I can walk," protested the old man.

"You're supposed to be dead." Sad grinned at him. "Climb on. . . ."

Speck Steeb's entrance into Oreana was unceremonious. He drew up at the door of the Oreana Saloon and fairly fell from his saddle. Buck Rainey, the sheriff, and "Wheezer' Wilson, his deputy, were crossing the street, and it was to them that Speck blurted his news.

"Get your breath, boy," advised the sheriff, taking Speck by the arm. "Come inside and tell it."

He led Speck inside the Oreana, where he had an interested audience. It did not take Speck long to give them the details.

"Whose horse did you ride?" asked Wheezer.

They ran outside and inspected the panting horse.

"She's a TJ brand," declared Wheezer.

"Belongs to that feller Swede Harrigan!" remarked the livery stable keeper excitedly. "They took their horses out early this mornin'."

"And one of them fellers shot old Eph Wyatt, eh?" Bunty O'Neil seemed pleased.

"Was the old man dead?" questioned the sheriff.

"Shot through the head," declared Speck. "Blood was runnin' all over him. I took a shot at them two jiggers, and . . . Say, are them the two—one of 'em that busted Bill Wyatt?"

"They're the little violets," said Snipe Lee, the only one of Bill Wyatt's men in town.

"Get your horses, boys," snapped the sheriff. "We'll find out more about this deal. Come on, Wheezer. Anybody that ain't got guns can get one at my office."

Speck sat down on the saloon steps and rested his head in his hands, realizing that he had incriminated those two men who had befriended him. In the novelty of living at the Diamond W Ranch he had forgotten these two strange cowboys.

He wondered dully if they had killed Eph Wyatt, and why.

Men were mounting at the hitchracks, and the sheriff and deputy rode out through a narrow alley and joined the others.

Speck got wearily to his feet and went back to the TJ horse. He would go along and show them where the thing happened, and he might be of assistance to those two strange cowboys. Anyway, he decided he would not show where he had found the horses.

He mounted and rode along, but he was close-mouthed now.

"You say you took a shot at 'em?" queried Snipe.

"I took a shot at somebody," qualified Speck. "I never named no names, did I?"

"But you saw 'em both, didn't you?" asked Bunty eagerly.

"I seen two men," Speck corrected him. "I don't know how they was dressed nor what they looked like."

"And that was one of their horses, eh?" Bunty insisted.

"I never said it was," Speck sighed. "My gosh, you fellers talk like I had said who killed Eph Wyatt. I found this horse, that's all."

"You found two horses," corrected the sheriff.

"Did I?" Speck grew indignant. "Who found this horse—me or you?"

"All right, kid." The sheriff laughed. "We ain't askin' you no more questions. I reckon this won't be hard to figure out."

"Not if you can find out why," said Speck gloomily.

Buck Rainey lifted his head and looked intently at Speck.

"That's about the most intelligent thing I've heard since the kid told his story. There's usually a reason."

V

RIDING around the point of a hill and down into the big swale, the men from Oreana drew rein beside the buckboard. One of the horses was dead, the other was on its feet, still in dangling harness, trying to crop all the grass within reach, but there was no sign of the dead man.

They dismounted and examined the surroundings. Beside the left front wheel of the buckboard was a puddle of blood, and there were streaks of blood on the spokes of the wheel.

"That's danged queer," observed the sheriff. "Kind of looks like the old man had e-vaporated."

They searched both sides of the road, but there was no sign of the corpse. One of the men unharnessed the grazing horse and turned it loose.

"Maybe the old man was only hurt, and went home," suggested a man.

"Ain't no boot tracks," objected Wheezer. "Of course he might of cut across the hills."

"And fought brush all the way?" The sheriff was not in favor of that theory. "Ask the kid where he found that horse."

But Speck was vague.

"I think I was over there," he said, pointing across the swale. "No, I don't think I was, either. Them horses were somewhere over by them cottonwoods, I think. Danged if I can be sure."

"Got buck-fever, eh?" laughed Snipe.

"Put yourself in his place," said the sheriff. "He's just a kid. Anybody'd get rattled. Well, suppose we ride over to the Diamond W?"

"If he got there, he flew," said Wheezer.

"Flyin' ain't hard, if you know how," said the sheriff. "Don't jump at conclusions. Let's go."

They rode to the Diamond W, scanning the country closely for any sign of the old man. The dusty road would have showed imprints of boots, but there was nothing but the tracks of four-footed animals and wagon-wheels.

The posse rode in at the Diamond W

Ranch and searched the place, but it did not take long to convince them that Eph Wyatt had not come home.

"Well, the next thing is to find Sontag and Harrigan," said the sheriff. "If the horse the kid rode is one of their mounts, they ought to know somethin' about this."

"I've just been thinkin'," said Wheezer. "Don't the law say that you've got to produce the body before you can make out a case of killin' against anybody?"

"It sure does," agreed the sheriff.

"And if these two fellers did kill him," went on the deputy, "couldn't they hide the body?"

The sheriff removed his hat and scratched his head thoughtfully. "Wheezer, your head *is* somethin' besides a hat-rack." He turned to gaze across the miles of brushy hills. "In fact, your theory is a dinger. But you didn't go far enough with it. I could hide a dozen corpses out in them hills. We might arrest 'em on suspicion, feed 'em a week or so and turn 'em loose again."

So they rode back to Oreana, with Speck trailing, and found Sad and Swede sitting on the sidewalk in front of the Oreana Saloon, talking with two of the sheriff's men, who had been on the lower ranges looking for Bar S cattle.

The posse dismounted. Speck paled slightly at sight of the two men. Neither Sad nor Swede had paid any attention to riders, but both got to their feet as Speck rode up.

Swede grinned at Speck and looked the horse over.

"I was wonderin' who got my bronc," he said, smiling up at the youngster. "Pretty good ridin' horse, ain't he, Speck?"

"Just fine," replied Speck hoarsely. "The stirrups was too long, that's all."

"Uh-huh. You must of made a hit with Blaze. Ordinarily he don't care for everybody."

"When did you lose this horse?" asked the sheriff.

"Today." Swede smiled widely.

"Where?"

"I don't know." Swede scratched his head thoughtfully. "We ain't familiar with this country, Sheriff. Me and Sad was taking a little ride through the hills, and we hears somebody bangin' away. We *sabe* that the deer season ain't open, so we opines it might be a personal matter. We're goin' along easy-like, tryin' to see what it means, when a bullet buzzes past my nose. It sure looks like we've horned into somethin', so we dismounts, leads the horses into a patch of brush, and goes on a hunt for the jigger that shot at us. We don't find him. We goes back and finds one of the horses is gone. And whoever took my bronc left a good Winchester rifle in its place—like a pack-rat would—so we took the rifle, doubled up on Sad's bronc and came to town to find the sheriff."

THE possemen shuffled their feet, while Speck heaved a deep sigh of relief.

"That's a pretty good story," observed Snipe Lee.

Swede looked closely at Snipe, a grin on his lips.

"I thought it was," he said slowly. "Anyway, it'll have to do until we can think of a better one."

The sheriff chewed at the corner of his mustache and wondered what to do next. Swede's story sounded plausible. It tallied with the one Speck had told.

"Old Man Wyatt got shot," volunteered Speck.

"The old man who was goin' to adopt you?" asked Sad.

"Uh-huh!"

"For gosh sake! Wasn't killed, was he, Speck?" Sad's surprise sounded genuine.

"If he was killed," the sheriff said, "somebody swiped the corpse."

Sad seemed shocked. "What would anybody swipe a corpse for, Sheriff?"

"You might as well tell 'em all about it," Snipe said sarcastically. "They prob'ly know more about it than you do."

Sad walked up to Snipe, who began to wish he had kept still, and studied him at close range.

"I don't reckon I've met you," Sad said easily. "What did you say your name was?"

"I never said."

"You're one of the Box Eight boys, ain't you?"

"Yeah, I work there."

"You *sabe* this range pretty well, don't you?"

Snipe licked his lips, wondering what these questions were leading to. Finally he nodded.

"Uh-huh." Sad grew thoughtful. "You know quite a lot about cattle and range work, don't you?"

"I ought to," said Snipe. "I've been punchin' cows for—"

"You're what I'd call an observin' person," interrupted Sad. "Some folks think I'm a mind reader." Sad shot a glance at Bunty, whose face reddened. "Maybe I am. Anyway, I picked you out for this test."

"What in hell do you mean?" blurted Snipe nervously.

"In all your experience on the range—" Sad propounded the question seriously—"in all of your experience, mind you, did you ever know you could tell a cattle rustler by the color of his fingernails?"

Almost before the words were out of Sad's mouth Snipe Lee jerked up his hand and shot a searching glance at his nails. It was an old joke in the cattle country. Likely every man present caught himself doing the same thing, except Sad and Swede.

In a flash Snipe Lee realized what he had done, and his hand dropped down to his gun—too late. Sad was into him, cramping his gun arm, making it impossible for Snipe to draw the gun from holster.

"Let go of me, cuss you!" snarled Snipe. "You can't pin nothin' like that onto me!"

Sad laughed, gave the arm an extra twist, swinging Snipe almost off his feet, and appropriated Snipe's six-shooter. Then he stepped back, while the luckless Box 8 man cursed witheringly.

"That don't mean nothin." The sheriff laughed. "I looked at my nails, too."

"So did I," confessed Wheezer.

"Some folks can't take a joke," Sad said mournfully. "Our friend here is too thin-minded. Here's your gun."

He tossed it to Snipe, who caught it in his left hand and shoved it into his holster. His right arm was almost helpless.

"Now"—Sad turned to the sheriff—"mind tellin' me what this shootin' scrape was all about? I may be a mind reader, but I can't cover all the territory."

The sheriff seemed willing to tell all he knew. Sad and Swede listened patiently, nodding now and then. The sheriff admitted that the posse had been looking for them.

"I don't blame you," said Sad. "It sure looked like we might of had a hand in it."

"Ain't nothin' been proved yet," Snipe said spitefully.

"Aw, go look at your nails!" snapped the sheriff. "You've talked almost too much, Snipe. . . Go put up the horses, Wheezer. If anybody can prove to me that old Eph Wyatt has been killed, I'll look for his body, but I'm no damned bloodhound."

The posse took their horses back to the hitchracks, and the sheriff's two cowpunchers drew him aside to tell him they had been able to round up only fifteen head in the lower ranges.

"Did you put 'em in the Bar S pasture?" asked the sheriff."

The cowboys had.

"That's all right," said the sheriff. "Somebody cut the fence and got away with the three hundred and ten head, so they might as well get the other fifteen."

"What do you mean?" asked "Slim" Wray, one of the cowboys.

Art Alberts, the other cowboy, listened with open mouth, while the sheriff explained.

"Aw, they must of just turned 'em loose," said Slim. "We'll round 'em up again, Buck."

"Go to it, Slim," said the sheriff.

SPECK sat down on the sidewalk with Sad and Swede, and the sheriff came over to him.

"Kid, you don't have much luck, do you?" he said. "I wish I had a home to take you to, but I ain't. I've got an extra cot in my office, where you can sleep—and Oreana won't see you go hungry."

Speck grinned. "Much obliged, Sheriff. Maybe I can help you around the office. I've got to find my dog before I do anything much. He sure rattled his hocks when that shootin' started. The

last I seen of him he was runnin' a gopher."

The sheriff laughed. "Come on, Speck. I'll show you that cot."

Speck gladly started after the sheriff, but ran back to Sad and Swede.

"I'm sorry I had to steal that horse," he whispered, "but I'm sure glad I yanked instead of squeezed."

He ran back after the sheriff, leaving Sad and Swede looking at each other curiously.

"Glad he yanked instead of squeezin'," Swede said blankly. "Now, what do you make of that, Sad?"

Sad Sontag laughed softly and looked across the street to where Buck Rainey and Speck were at the sheriff's office door.

"He must of meant that rifle, Swede. He flinched on the pull. By golly, that kid sure is a dinger. Yanked on the trigger and pulled the muzzle far enough to the right to miss us. He's got nerve to burn, and"—Sad stopped and reached for his cigarette makings—"he deserves a better deal than he's been gettin'."

"Uh-huh," Swede yawned. "Here comes Bill Wyatt and his man Friday."

VI

WYATT and Abe Snow, a tall, dark complexioned cowboy, rode up to the Cactus Saloon hitchrack and dismounted. Snipe Lee met them, talked earnestly, and the three went into the saloon.

"Snipe Lee is tellin' 'em all about it," said Sad, "and it won't be sweet news to Bill's ears. I hate to fight on a empty stomach, so let's fold the old insides around a flock of food before trouble starts."

They walked up the street to a restaurant, where they sat down facing the door and ordered a big meal.

"Well, our alibi sure got past with the sheriff," Swede commented.

"Sure." Sad laughed joyfully. "You are one of the best liars I ever heard. I'll bet Snipe Lee is still wonderin' if his nails show that he's a rustler."

"I wonder if he is?" Swede said ruminatively. "He sure took it to heart."

Sad leaned back in his chair to allow the waiter to place a platter of food before him. The waiter was a pasty-faced, stoop-shouldered individual with a crooked nose and a missing front tooth. Sad looked at the platter and up at the waiter.

"Three eggs apiece, waiter?"

"Yeah." The waiter grinned. "Thought you might be hungry. Won't cost yuh any more than two would."

"Gosh, this is a regular place to eat," declared Sad. "Do you size up your customers and feed 'em accordin'?"

"No-o-o. Them extra eggs are for whippin' Bunty O'Neil."

Sad looked curiously at the waiter. "Kinda of like gettin' a medal for bravery, eh?"

"I don't know about that. See that crooked nose and that missin' tooth? Well, I never thought about kickin' Bunty's shins."

"He got you, did he?"

"He sure did. Never knew what hit me."

"Bunty's sure a character," observed Swede, attacking his ham and eggs.

"Character, hell!" growled the waiter. "He's a dirty fighter. Somebody will kill him some day, and then he'll wish he'd been square."

"Most dead men kind of repent," said Sad. "What do you know about Bill Wyatt?"

The waiter grinned again. "You whipped him, too. I don't know much about him. Bunty butted Bill, and Bill petted him with the barrel of a gun. They was thick as thieves before that. Bill got Bunty to buy the Oreana. Folks used to say that Bill owned an interest in it, but I don't guess there was any truth in that. Bunty poured liquor into poor Jim Steeb and killed him. They tell me Bunty's got Steeb's notes for a lot of money. Steeb practically lived at the Oreana. Bunty got him to drinkin' absence. Did you ever see an absence drinker? It sure is awful stuff. Make a man kick his grandmother."

"Did Steeb kick his grandmother?" asked Swede seriously.

"I don't guess he had one."

"Made it kind of bad," observed Swede. "Feller ought to check up on his relations before he starts drinkin' that stuff."

"Must be an awful relief to kick the old lady," said Sad. "I never had one. Still, you never have everythin' in this life. . . Can we have some coffee?"

"You sure can. I'll bring you in the whole pot."

"We're prominent citizens," said Sad, and grinned as the waiter hurried away. "If somebody kills us, they'll prob'ly put up a big monument for us in the middle of the street.

"Yeah," reflected Swede seriously, "and they'll carve on it, 'All fools ain't dead yet, but we got two big ones cinched.' "

While Sad and Swede appeased their hunger, Bill Wyatt, Abe Snow, and Snipe Lee stood at the Cactus bar and drank. Snipe had told Bill and Abe all about the shooting affair, and bitterly censured the sheriff for not arresting Sad and Swede. Snipe, still smarting from his encounter with Sad, was inclined to be vindictive.

"He accused me of bein' a rustler," complained Snipe. "He can't get away with a thing like that, Bill."

"He got away with it, didn't he?" demanded Bill. "You talk too much, Snipe. But where do you suppose the old man is?"

Snipe shook his head. "I can't even start to suppose, Bill. He wasn't at the buckboard, nor at the ranch. There was the dead horse and the live one. Everthin' was just like that kid said, except we couldn't find old Eph."

"What did the sheriff think?" asked Bill.

"Well, he didn't know. Wheezer Wilson figured they had shot the old man and got scared that somebody might find it out and hid the body."

"What good would that do?" demanded Bill.

"You got to prove killin'," said Snipe wisely. "If there ain't no corpse you can't prove nothin'. A man ain't noways dead until you can identify his corpse. If they don't find old Eph, the law won't never figure him to be dead."

"But if he don't never show up, he must be dead," argued Bill.

"He must be," agreed Snipe, "but the law don't look at it like me and you would. Maybe old Eph wandered off in the brush and died; maybe somebody took the corpse and hid it."

"But why would they hide it?" Bill poured out a fresh drink and drank it raw. "I don't *sabe* it, Snipe."

"To protect themselves," explained Snipe. "Like I said, the law don't know that anybody got killed yet."

SLIM Wray and Art Alberts, the sheriff's two cowhands, came in, so the argument was dropped. Bill invited them to partake of his hospitality, which they accepted, and the talk drifted to the fact that the Bar S herd was missing.

"Bunty O'Neil is sure fussin' about that," declared Slim. "If we can't find them cows Bunty won't get his money. He says he'll have them cows or somebody'll be darned sorry."

"He talks big," grunted Bill Wyatt. "I ain't got no love for that Sontag, but I'm glad he piled Bunty."

"Who are them two fellers, anyway?" asked Abe Snow, looking at the light through his glass of liquor. "Look like a couple of cow detectives to me."

"What would they be doin' here?" demanded Snipe.

"They made you look at your fingernails." Slim Wray smiled meaningly.

Snipe growled and reached for his glass. "They ain't got nothin' on me."

"Well, they ain't been here long," hinted Slim.

"What's this about lookin' at fingernails?" queried Bill.

"Why, Sontag asked Snipe if he knew you could tell a cattle rustler by lookin' at his fingernails."

Bill glanced at his nails while Slim snorted with laughter.

"There you go!" he chuckled. "That's what Snipe done."

"That's a hell of a joke!" growled Bill, glowering. "All fingernails are the same color."

"You looked!" choked Slim.

"You don't mean to insinuate that I'm a rustler, do yuh?" Bill grew suddenly belligerent, as he glared at Slim.

"Aw, cool off," advised Slim. "You're just like Snipe. He got mad, too."

"Well, I'm no rustler, Slim," declared Bill coldly. "I'll accept your apology, but don't say anythin' like that again."

"Let's have another drink," said Slim.

"I'm hones', too," blurbled Snipe, who was looking owlishly at himself in the back-bar mirror. "Almos' too honesht."

"Almost," said Bill savagely.

It was not often that the Box 8 outfit drank too much liquor, but that night they threw all reserve to the winds. Whisky seemed to have little effect on Bill Wyatt, except to make him savage. But he kept out of the Oreana Saloon. Several times during the evening he met Sad and Swede, but avoided direct contact with them.

"Look out for Bill Wyatt," Slim Wray cautioned Sad and Swede.

"What's achin' him tonight?" asked Sad.

"Liquor and a bad disposition. Old Eph Wyatt was his uncle."

"*Was* his uncle?" queried Sad. "Ain't he still his uncle?"

"Well, sure." Slim hesitated. "They're sayin' the old man is dead, you know. I suppose Bill is workin' up a little war-medicine for himself. Of course the sheriff don't believe you had any hand in shootin' the old man, but the sheriff ain't everybody."

"Much obliged." Sad grinned at him. "We'll look out for Bill. He prob'ly thinks he owes me somethin'."

"And he'll pay you, if he gets a safe chance."

"And he'll get a receipt," said Sad meaningly. "Anyway, I'm sure thankin' you, Slim."

But Bill Wyatt was too wise to start trouble. For once in his life he decided to let discretion be the better part of valor. He got Snipe and Abe away from the Cactus bar and walked them up and down the street. They sobered considerably, and Bill outlined his scheme.

"They hid the body of the old man, that's a cinch. Fightin' 'em won't tell us where it's hid, *sabe?* They've got a room at the Oreana Hotel, and them partitions ain't so thick. Here's the scheme. Abe, me and you will see if we can get the room next to 'em. Maybe they'll talk enough to let us know a few things. Snipe, you take our horses to the livery-stable, and stay there. If they decide to leave town, come a-runnin'. Leave our horses all saddled, so we won't lose any time. And from now on, we don't take no more liquor. You better go to the stable now, Snipe. Me and Abe will get the room. If it's empty we'll just take it."

Snipe grumbled profanely, but went to the hitchrack after the horses. The stable-keeper showed him which stalls to use, asked Snipe if he wanted to take off the saddles, accepted the two-bits per head and went back to his gear room.

He thought Snipe went out, which Snipe did not. A little later the stable-keeper went out, shut the big doors and went up to the Oreana Saloon. Snipe stretched out on the grain bin and went to sleep. He had a pint of liquor on his hip, which assisted in his departure to the land of dreams.

SAD and Swede were in the Oreana Saloon when the stable-keeper ran into them and accepted their hospitality.

"Kind of quiet tonight," observed Sad.

"Yeah, it is." The stable-keeper looked around the room. "It always is this early. Maybe it'll pick up. The Box Eight must figure on makin' a night of it, 'cause they've stabled their horses. It ain't often they do that. Usually leave their broncs at the rack until they're ready to go home."

Sad viewed himself in the back-bar mirror and wondered why Bill Wyatt and his outfit intended to make a night of it. He drew Swede out of the Oreana and they made the rounds, looking for Bill and his gang, but none of them were in evidence.

"You think they're layin' for us?" asked Swede.

"I don't know," Sad said thoughtfully. "Maybe they are. Let's look a little further."

They went down the street to the hotel and entered the dingy little office, which was little more than a wide hall, lighted by a hanging lamp. The rooms were all on the second floor. Behind the little counter sat the proprietor, tilted back against the wall, reading a year-old magazine.

"Goin' to bed early, ain't you?" he asked.

"It is a little early," agreed Sad.

"Sober, too," observed the proprietor, and laughed. "Folks don't usually go to

bed sober on Saturday night here. Bill Wyatt and Abe Snow got too much under their belts, and bought a room a while ago. They sure must of punished a lot of hooch."

"Yeah, I reckon they did," Sad agreed lightly. "They'll prob'ly snore all night and keep us awake."

"By jing, I never thought about that when I put 'em in Number Fve. That's right beside you fellers. Say!" He tilted forward and got to his feet. "I'll get 'em out of there."

"No, don't do that," said Sad quickly. "They're likely asleep right now. Shucks, we don't mind."

"Well, if you don't mind. By golly, I never thought about it when I got 'em the room. I'll change 'em if you say so."

"No, that's all right," assured Sad.

They sauntered outside and crossed to the Cactus hitchrack, where Sad appropriated a lariat which he concealed under his coat. Then they went back to the hotel and climbed up the stairs. Both of them staggered as they went down the hall.

Sad carried a narrow loop of rope in his hands as he blundered drunkenly into the door of Number Five and quickly slipped the loop around the door-knob.

"Hey!" Swede chuckled drunkenly. "Tha's the wrong door, Sad. We sleep in thish room."

"Tha's right," muttered Sad. "Excuse me, everybody."

He staggered across the hall and against the other door, where he quickly drew the rope tight and threw several half-hitches around the other door knob.

"What's the matter? Can't you fin' the key-hole, Swede?"

"Thish is wrong key," declared Swede. "Too small, I tell yuh. "C'mon."

They went down the hall, reviling the proprietor for giving them the wrong key, which he had not. In fact, they had no key.

"That was a maguey rope," chuckled Sad. "Them things ain't got no stretch in 'em. Bill Wyatt is smart enough to want to know more, which ain't nothin' against him."

"Now, what do we pull off next?" asked Swede, all but doubling up with laughter.

"Find Snipe Lee," said Sad. "I've got a hunch."

They faded down the dark street toward the livery-stable, while Bill Wyatt and Abe Snow sat on a bed and waited for them to come back with the right key.

It was a long, long wait.

VII

FINALLY Bill Wyatt swore disgustedly and decided to go out and see what had become of Sad Sontag and his partner, but the door would not open. It would slip past the lock, which proved that it was fastened from the outside—and which also proved that Sad and Swede had out-smarted them.

It was dark outside and the two-story drop was too much for Bill to risk.

"They've roped us in," he declared, punctuating his remark with oaths. "They wasn't drunk, Abe."

But Abe did not care. Stretched out on the bed he was snorting blissfully. Bill pried the door open as far as possible with the barrel of his gun, cut a notch with his pocket-knife and managed to tie his knife to the barrel of Abe's gun strongly enough to enable him to cut the rope.

He left Abe sleeping and went downstairs, where he accosted the sleepy proprietor.

"Sontag and Harrigan come in yet?" he demanded.

"They was in here a couple hours ago," replied the proprietor, "but ain't been in since. Said they was afraid you'd keep 'em awake snorin'."

Bill snorted and went outside.

He made the rounds of the saloons, but could not find Sad and Swede, so headed for the livery-stable, where he found the stable-man in the gear room, getting ready for bed.

"Hyah, Bill," greeted the stable-man. "Want your bronc?"

"No," said Bill shortly. "I'm lookin' for Sontag and Harrigan, and I wondered if they left tonight."

The stable-man picked up his lantern and walked out to the stalls.

"Their horses and saddles are gone," he said. "They must of rode out while

I was uptown."

"Seen anythin' of Snipe Lee?" Bill asked reflectively.

"Not since he brought your horses down here."

Bill turned and went out.

The stable-man walked over to the oat bin, thinking maybe he had better grain Wyatt's horses, hung up his lantern and unfastened the staple which held down the lid. As he swung up the lid, Snipe Lee sat up and looked him in the face.

The shock was so great that the stable-man dropped the lid on Snipe's unprotected head. From within came the muffled voice of Snipe, demanding to know why everybody was picking on him.

The stable-man lifted the lid and let Snipe out. He was still half-drunk, dazed, and inclined to be indignant.

"Well, how did you get in there, anyway?" demanded the stable-man, indignant himself.

Snipe scratched his head thoughtfully and looked into the oat bin.

"Mus' of fell in," he said thickly. "How in hell does anybody get into oat bins, I'd crave to ask you?"

"You couldn't fasten the staple," argued the stable-man.

"Thasso? Lemme tell yuh, I'm smart." Snipe rocked on his heels and goggled owlishly at the lantern.

"But you couldn't do a thing like that!" declared the stable-man. "You could fall into the bin, all right, but I'm danged if you could lock the lid from the outside."

"Is thasso? Ha, ha, ha, ha! Well, smarty, couldn't I lock it firs'? Anshwer me that. Couldn't I? I must of done it thataway. Shay"—Snipe looked around foolishly—"have you sheen anythin' of Sontag and Harrigan?"

"They left here quite a while ago. But Bill Wyatt was just here, and he asked for you."

"Huh! Well, I'm mush obliged. So long."

Snipe went weaving out of the door, while the stable-man filled the bucket with oats and fed the horses. He flung the bucket against the wall, picked up his lantern and went back to his bunk, still wondering how on earth a man could get inside an oat bin and lock himself in from the outside. . . .

The next morning Sheriff Buck Rainey and Wheezer Wilson went hunting cows. They went past the Bar S, and were agreeably surprised to find most of the last fifteen Bar S cattle in the pasture. They stopped to put up the broken wires, and rode on.

Slim Wray and Art Alberts had gone further north, looking for the missing herd. The next day the sheriff was to sell out the Bar S, and he wanted more than fifteen head of cattle.

"Looks like a short chance," observed Wheezer, as they rode further into the hills. "We can't find much except Box Eight and Diamond W's. Old Eph Wyatt must have quite a lot of cows, Buck."

The sheriff spat reflectively. "I wonder what did happen to the old man. It don't seem reasonable to think that Sontag and Harrigan had anythin' to do with the shootin'. There ain't no motive."

"We don't know of any," amended Wheezer.

"My gosh, you're gettin' particular. Pretty soon you'll be doin' all your eatin' with a fork."

"Not less they make a kind that don't leak food. . . There's Bill Wyatt and Snipe Lee."

TWO riders were coming toward them. They drew rein and waited for the Box Eight boss and his puncher.

"Lookin for Bar S stock?" asked Bill, after the customary greetings had been exchanged.

"That's about all it amounts to," replied Buck Rainey. "We ain't found none yet."

Bill twisted in his saddle and pointed east. "We seen five or six head over thataway this mornin', and there was fifteen or twenty head out near the Box Eight."

"That ain't noways three hundred and ten head," growled Buck.

Wheezer grinned at Snipe Lee. "What happened to you last night, Snipe? I heard Jimmy Logan, the stable-keeper, talkin' about findin' you in the oat bin, with the lid locked."

Snipe twisted his face disgustedly. "Don't remember a thing about it. Took

our broncs to the stable, set down on the oat bin, and don't know a darned thing after that."

"And somebody roped two doors together at the hotel," said Buck. "Slim Wray found the lariat half-hitched around his door-knob, so he thought it was a warnin' that somebody had hung to his door. He slept in the barn with a six-gun strapped to his wrist."

"That must of been after we left," Bill said drily. "Got any track of the old man, Buck?"

"No!" replied the sheriff.

"Sontag and Harrigan rode out of Oreana about midnight."

"How'd you know?"

"Jimmy Logan said they did."

"That so?" the sheriff murmured reflectively. "I wonder where they went. I don't *sabe* that pair, Bill."

"You ain't got nothin' on the rest of us, Buck."

"They're sure full of fun," offered Wheezer.

"They're full of hell!" snorted Bill. "They'll run against a snag, if they don't watch out."

"They ain't so young," observed Wheezer. "'S funny they ain't run against it before this."

"This ain't findin' us any Bar S stock," reminded the sheriff. "Want to ride with us, Bill?"

"Might as well."

And while Bill and Snipe joined forces with the sheriff, Sad Sontag and Swede Harrigan also rode into the hills, also looking for Bar S stock. They found one of that brand, which they examined closely, noting that the iron had been run on the right shoulder.

"Well, that's one of the three hundred and ten," observed Sad, as they moved on.

"This sale won't be worth attendin'." declared Swede. "I wish we'd stayed in Sundown."

"You want too much," said Sad. "I wonder what Bill Wyatt and his bunch had to say? I'll bet Snipe Lee didn't know what happened to him, either, Swede."

"I'll bet he didn't. Only thing I hope is that somebody let him out of the oat bin before he suffocated."

"Aw, that lid was full of cracks. At our hotel Wyatt was foxy enough to take that adjoinin' room, where they'd have a swell chance to hear us talk, and I'll bet he cursed the man who invented a maguey rope."

Sad pulled up his horse, as several Box 8 cattle came out of a draw beyond them. He studied them, a half-smile on his face, then took down his rope.

"What you goin' to do, Sad?" asked Swede.

"Practice a little." Sad grinned, spurring his horse forward and shaking out his loop. Swede swore foolishly, but did not follow him.

The cattle broke into a gallop, heading back toward the ravine, but Sad singled out a rangy red steer and rode swiftly in pursuit. The animal tried to reach the cover of a willow thicket, but the loop sailed true, dropped fair over the horns, and Sad Sontag made his dally in approved style.

Sad's cinch, however, was far too loose for a roping stunt, and when the jerk came it yanked the saddle high up over the horse's withers, upsetting the calculations of a well-regulated roping horse.

The big steer took a header into the brush, the horse skidded over the edge of the washout, and Sad went out of the saddle like a flying-squirrel hunting for a more favorable location.

Swede raced past, his own rope in hand, dismounted almost on the run and proceeded to hog-tie the steer, which had had the shock of its life. Sad's horse regained its feet, blew the alkali dust from its nostrils and looked back at Sad, who was sitting against the opposite bank, rubbing the alkali out of his eyes.

"You rised something, didn't you?" jeered Swede. "You'll never get no sense, Sad Sontag. Ropin' a steer as big as that one on a loose cinch! I've seen a lot of fools in my time!"

"You hadn't ought to be vain," Sad said painfully. "Did you tie up the little pet?"

"Yeah, I tied it." Swede spat out some alkali viciously. "If I hadn't, that red steer would of made a pet out of you, cowboy."

"Thank you kindly, Swede."

SAD got up, worked his saddle back into place, and walked over to the wheezing steer. It was lying on its right side, glaring its hate from blood-shot eyes. Sad squatted on his heels and reached for his cigarette papers.

"I don't know why you done this, Sad," Swede complained . "That steer feels the insult awful strong, and I'm goin' to ask *you* to turn it loose. I'm no matador. I'll bet you even money that when you take the piggin'-string off that steer, he'll beat you to your bronc."

Sad sang mournfully:

O-o-o-oh, Susie Jones was a clingin'
vi-i-i-ine,
But her father was a pi-i-i-izen
o-o-oak.

"Oh, all right," sighed Swede.

Sad got to his feet and walked over to the steer.

"Come here, Swede." he called, "and help me turn him over."

"Do you think he's tired, Sad" drawled Swede. "And after we turn him over, do we have to set him up for a spell?"

"Don't strain yourself." Sad grinned.

They had completed their turning process when something unexpected happened.

"Don't move, gents!"

It was the voice of Buck Rainey, the sheriff of Oreana. Sad and Swede whirled quickly to see Buck, Wheezer Wilson, Bill Wyatt and Snipe Lee standing just a few feet away, guns in hand.

"Keep your hands where they are," warned the sheriff. "Get their guns, Wheezer."

VIII

MOVING forward, Wheezer emptied Sad's and Swede's holsters, while the two Sundown cowboys looked blankly at each other.

"We been watchin' you," said the sheriff easily. "It ain't ethical to hang your rope on other men's stock in this range, Sontag."

"That's one of my animals, too," Wyatt said angrily.

"I apologize," said Sad contritely.

"Apologize!" snorted Bill. "I—guess—you—would!"

"You might at least be gentleman enough to accept it."

"Say!" Bill Wyatt's voice shook with anger. "Do you think you can get away with just an apology? What kind of a cow country did you come from, anyway?"

"Pretty fair," said Sad seriously. "Lots of nice folks up thataway, Wyatt."

"Yeah, I'll bet!"

"Got 'em before they had a chance to heat an iron," observed Snipe. The sheriff looked all around and even inspected their saddles. He seemed disappointed not to find anything they might have used to misbrand an animal.

"I don't *sabe* this," he admitted. "What was you fellers tryin' to do, anyway?"

"Just bein' playful," drawled Swede.

The sheriff studied the steer. Wheezer squatted on his heels, Sad's gun in one hand, and Swede's in the other.

"Well, I reckon I'll have to take you fellers to town." The sheriff motioned to Snipe Lee. "Let the steer go, Snipe. We've got enough witnesses, I reckon."

"You're danged right we have!" grunted Bill Wyatt.

Snipe Lee walked over to the steer and loosened the rope. Under any other circumstances, it is doubtful that any of them would have considered turning a range steer loose among unmounted men.

Wheezer was holding the two six-shooters between his shirt and chaps now, as he manufactured a cigarette.

Snipe yanked off the rope and stepped back, slapping the big red animal across the rump with the coils. The steer heaved to its feet with a deep bellow of rage, whirled with the agility of a deer and lunged straight at Buck Rainey and Bill Wyatt.

The left horn of the animal caught in one side of Buck's vest and he went headlong into the washout. Wyatt and Wheezer collided and they went down together.

The steer whirled at the brink of the washout and headed for Snipe Lee, who was waving his rope and yelling. Wheezer had forgotten that he was custodian of the captured artillery, and the guns had barely fallen in the dust when Sad swept them up, whirled and

went into his saddle.

Swede was mounted almost as soon, and while the sheriff's posse scrambled for safety and took pot-shots at the infuriated steer, Sad and Swede rode out of gunshot toward a place where they might cry out their mirth in safety.

A bullet finally took all the fight out of the steer, and the dusty, scratched and bruised posse managed to get together for a mutual condemnation meeting. Wheezer had lost a tooth in his collision with Wyatt, and he seemed to think that Wyatt had done it with malice aforethought. Snipe Lee had a lump the size of an egg over his right eye.

"Blame yourself for that, Snipe," wailed Wheezer. "You hit yourself with that hondo."

"I did not! The steer hit me!"

"You never was within fifty feet of that steer!"

"What did you turn it loose for?" demanded Wyatt.

"He told me to," Snipe said, pointing at Buck, who was rubbing his shoulder.

"Ain't you got no sense of your own?" queried Wyatt plaintively.

"You ought to listen to nobody but Bill," declared Wheezer sarcastically. "He's your boss, Snipe—the clumsy danged fool! Yeah, I mean you, Bill! How did you ever expect to dodge a steer, goin' the way you was? If it hadn't been for you, I'd still have them guns and we'd have our prisoners."

"You didn't have them guns when we met," declared Wyatt. "Not by a dang sight, you didn't! An' I'm no clumsy fool, either."

"Well, you ain't an active one, that's a cinch."

"Aw-w-w, don't fight about it," wailed Buck. "Neither one of you are acrobats, and you're both fools. Why didn't you watch the prisoners?"

"Why didn't you?" countered Wheezer angrily.

" 'Cause I was hangin' to that steer's horn by my vest, that's why. It's a good thing that vests don't have sleeves."

"Well, we might as well go back," said Wheezer. He put his right forefinger in his mouth and invited them to inspect the damage. "Aw-w-gle ugl nahk umf foot 'n aw-w-gl," he told them distinctly.

"Yawgl nawgl woggle," replied the sheriff seriously.

Wheezer spat. "Think you're danged smart, don't you?"

"Well, I can talk any language you can. Let's go home."

THEY limped back down the draw to their horses, mounted and rode back toward Oreana.

"What'll you do if them fellers come back to Oreana?" asked Wyatt.

"You don't think they will, do you?" asked Buck.

"I said, if they do."

"Well, if they do, I don't know what I'll do, Bill. And if they don't, I don't know either. There wasn't a thing around that they could use to blot a brand nor change one."

"Then why did they throw that steer?" demanded Bill.

"I don't know. Do you? You seen as much as I did."

"Why did they turn that steer over, if they wasn't goin' to get at the brand?" questioned Snipe Lee.

The sheriff glared at him.

"That'll be about all for this lesson," he said angrily.

"Well, can't we discuss the thing?" Bill asked peevishly.

"Sure you can. But don't ask me things. I ain't got no brains, and I'm willin' to admit it. Ask Snipe a few questions, if you must ask somebody."

"Ask him why he turned that steer loose, "suggested Wheezer.

"Or you might ask the steer," said Buck. "He prob'ly heard 'em say what they was goin' to do with him."

The questions ended right there, and the four men said little more on the way to Oreana. It was rather late in the afternoon when they arrived. The sheriff and Wheezer went to their office, where they rubbed their bruises with liniment and used up their supply of court plaster.

"This afternoon's work wasn't anythin' to brag about," said Buck meaningly. "I don't reckon Bill and Snipe will spread the joyous tidin's, so we won't."

"I once read about a sheriff that always got his man," said Wheezer. "He just never made no mistakes. I don't

remember who the feller was that wrote the book."

"Some feller with considerable imagination," said Buck.

"Yeah," agreed Wheezer. "He'd prob'ly have been able to figure out what them two fellers was tryin' to do with that red steer, Buck. I never seen such a feller as this'n was. De-duct things! Whooee! Always knowed just what to say, too. Nobody had to ask him any questions. I suppose he could of answered any question, and I suppose he would, too."

Buck squinted at Wheezer, who was innocently examining his mouth in the mirror.

"And nobody asked him any questions, Wheezer?"

"No sir."

"Well, I wish I could be elected in his county. If you're tryin' to make me mad, go ahead, pardner. I know just how much I can stand, and you don't."

"Well"—Wheezer grinned—"I ain't fool enough to ask you when you've got aplenty."

Young Speck Steeb came in there carrying Boze, the pup, in his arms and smiling triumphantly.

"The gol-derned pup found *me*!" he declared.

"Where did he find you?" grinned Wheezer.

"In the restaurant garbage can."

"My gosh!" exploded Buck. "What was you doin' in the garbage can, Speck?"

"Well," said Speck, "that's where I found Boze."

"Our family is all united," observed Wheezer. "I reckon we'll pick fleas from now on, Buck. What do you know, Speck?"

"I know that Bill Wyatt is tellin' folks that Sontag and Harrigan are rustlers. He said they was ropin' his cows, and that they got away from you. Is that right?"

"He's tellin' it, is he?" grunted Buck.

"Yeah, and he said that it was time the cattlemen took the law in their own hands."

Buck and Wheezer looked at each other. Wheezer grinned, but Buck was serious. Slim Wray and Art Alberts rode up and dismounted. They were dusty and tired.

"We put twenty-five head in the Bar S pasture," said Slim. "And that's every darned head we could find. We picked most of ' em up near the Box Eight, and it kind of looks like they might be a little bunch that got away from the main herd. If that bunch hadn't been stolen, it's a cinch we'd find more, Buck."

"I s'pose." Buck nodded. "It ain't goin' to be much of a sale, but we'll sell what there is."

"Sontag and Harrigan came down here to buy stock, didn't they?"

"That remains to be seen, Slim. They probably won't be at the sale tomorrow."

"I'd like to make a bet on that," said Speck.

Buck laughed at the boy. "You'd like to bet on it, eh? What have you got to bet?"

"Well—" Speck hesitated and shifted his feet. "I ain't got no money, but I—I'll bet my dog."

BUCK rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment.

"No bet, Speck," he said. "Your hunch is too good. Any old time a kid is willin' to bet his dog, the odds are all against the other feller."

Abe Snow had been in town nearly all day, and now he rode back toward the Box 8 with Bill Wyatt and Snipe Lee, who had imbibed much liquor in a short space of time. Abe had been left in town to see if he could hear anything regarding Sontag and Harrison, but it was Wyatt and Lee who had the information.

They rode in at the Box 8, stabled their horses and went to the ranchhouse. There was no one there, except the Chinese cook, One Bum Lung. He was cooking supper when Bill went into the kitchen to see how long it would be before eating time.

"Two men come today," stated One Bum Lung. "I no *sabe* 'em. One loan ho'se, one bay ho'se."

"Yeah?" Bill scowled. "One roan horse and one bay horse, eh? What did they want?"

"No talk. I seeum on collal fence. Long time set on fence."

"Long time set on fence, eh?" re-

peated Bill. "Where did they set on the fence?"

"Longside lil'l chute, where bland put on. You *sabe* place?"

"Uh-huh." Bill whirled and went back into the living room, where Snipe and Abe were arguing over the ownership of an old magazine.

"Sontag and Harrigan were here today," said Bill. "Lung says they sat on the corral fence beside the brandin' chute."

"The hell they did!" snorted Snipe. "What for?"

"How would I know?" retorted Bill.

"That don't look so good," said Abe seriously. "The sooner we run them jiggers out of the country the better it'll be for us."

"And that's no danged lie," agreed Bill heartily. "If they show up at that sale tomorrow, there'll be somethin' doin'. You fellers keep your eyes open, *sabe?*"

"Yeah, we'll do that, too," agreed Snipe. "I reckon Bunty will be at the sale, eh?"

Bill laughed shortly. "Yeah, he'll be there. I threw a spoke into his machine, but he don't dare yelp. Keep your eye on Bunty, too . . . This Sontag and his pard Harrigan think they're smart, buttin' into things that don't concern 'em."

"Started over that damn dog!" snapped Abe. "If we hadn't tied a can on the kid's dog, these two wouldn't never of mixed into it. If it hadn't been for the dog, you and Sontag wouldn't had a fight. And then the old man wanted to adopt the kid, 'cause the kid didn't like you."

"Glub pile!" called One Bum Lung, and they filed into the kitchen.

IX

DID YOU ever read 'Robinson Crusoe'?" asked Sad Sontag, leaning back in a dilapidated chair at the Bar S Ranch, a big book balanced on his knees.

Swede Harrigan squinted through his revolver barrel at the window, decided that it was clean enough, and reached for the oil can.

"Know it by heart," he declared. "It was written on Friday by a man who found tracks in the sand. Where'd you get that book, Sad?"

"Upstairs. Probably old man Steeb gave to the kid on Christmas. That story kind of brings back memories of my childhood."

"Yeah, it must," agreed Sweede. "You was eighteen years old before you learned to spell your name."

"Oh, yeah, that's right. Well, it brings back memories of my callow youth. How does that suit you?"

"Suits me." Swede shoved the gun into his holster. "That danged deputy sheriff sure was careless to let our guns fall in the dust thataway. Say, I wonder what they'll say when we show up at the sale? My gosh, the sheriff may be out gunnin' for us right now. He . . . Say, why don't you listen to me? You don't seem to care a hang, Sad."

"I was just wonderin'," said Sad. "By golly, it'll be a good way to find out for sure."

"Find out what?"

"What did you say, Swede?"

"Well, now that's sure intelligible," declared Swede. He sighed. "I hope Bill Wyatt and his gang shows up. If there ever were three danged fools, them are the ones. They're either ignorant, or they've got a lot of nerve."

"They think they're clever," said Sad.

"Then this is an awful ignorant settlement. We better get all set before they show up."

And while Sad and Swede got ready to receive them, the delegation rode from Oreana to attend the sale. Several buyers had come from the lower ranges, lured by the chance of buying something cheap.

Bunty O'Neil rode with the sheriff and his assistant, Wheezer. He was still hoping the sale would bring enough money to pay his notes against the Bar S, but the sheriff assured him it would not. The ranch itself was not worth over five thousand, and thirty or forty head of cattle would not bring enough more to cover the amount of the notes. Als, it was doubtful if a buyer could be found for the ranch.

Bill Wyatt and his two men rode together, and it seemed that they were unusually quiet of demeanor. Speck rode with the sheriff, still willing to bet his

dog that Sad and Swede would attend the sale. Speck had begun to realize that the Bar S was to be sold for debts, and that it no longer would be home to him. Buck Rainey had explained it to him, and a great wrath welled up within Speck against Bunty O'Neil, the man who was indirectly responsible for this loss.

"That sure is dirty work," Speck declared hotly. "Don't I have the worst luck? Lose my ranch, and then somebody shoots the old man who was goin' to help me out. I hope to gosh that somebody gets paid for all this!"

They rode in at the Bar S and dismounted at the big corral near the stable. The sheriff sent Slim Wray and Art Alberts to round up the cattle in the pasture, while the buyers walked around, inspecting the buildings. The sheriff was a busy man, trying to get an opinion on the value of the ranch, but none of the cattlemen seemed inclined to make a bid. Bunty sat on the corral fence, gloomy of face, surly of speech. He wanted his money, and he did not care who knew it.

"Close to ten thousand," he answered mournfully, when someone asked him how much the place owed him. "Got the notes right with me. That's the last time anybody will ever hook me for that much."

"Well, where are all the Bar S cattle?" asked Gilroy, a rancher who owned an outfit on Bitter River. He had arrived too late to find out that the cattle had disappeared.

"Stolen," said Wheezer.

"Stolen? How long since they disappeared?"

Wheezer started to explain, but the boys were bringing the herd. Those at the corral helped swing them in through the wide gate.

"Hey!" called Slim. "There's a Box Eight in that bunch."

"Leave him in!" yelled the sheriff. "We can cut him out later."

They shut the gate behind the last animal and prepared for the sale. The assemblage sat on the corral fence and watched the cattle milling around. Dust clouded up the scene to some extent, but the men were all old dust-eaters.

"There's thirty-nine head," declared the sheriff. "It's a mixture of breeds, ages, et cettery. How much am I bid for the bunch?"

"Three hundred and ninety dollars," offered the Bitter River man.

THE PRICE of ten dollars per head brought a laugh from the crowd.

"Three hundred and ninety-one," bid another.

"Three ninety-one and two bits."

"Wait a minute!" begged the sheriff. "My gosh, that ain't no way to bid. Them animals would be dirt cheap at thirty per head."

"I'll give twenty dollars per head."

The sheriff turned quickly at the sound of a familiar voice. Sad Sontag was just outside the corral and behind the men on the fence. Bunty O'Neil almost fell off the fence. Swede Harrigan was standing near Sad, hanging onto the neck of a half-filled gunny-sack.

"Well, I'll be damned!"

The sheriff climbed over the fence and faced Sad, who merely grinned and asked the sheriff if his bid was high enough to buy the cattle.

"Hello, Mr. Sontag," called young Speck from his perch.

"Hello, Speck. How's Boze?"

"He's fine. By golly, I'm glad they didn't catch you."

Sad laughed and turned back to the sheriff. "I hope the old red cow didn't hurt you, Sheriff," he said.

"Myah!" snorted the sheriff. "You've got your nerve to come here."

"Not so much. We intended to come to the sale."

"Dn't let 'em bluff you," said Snipe Lee anxiously.

"Nobody's goin' to bluff me," declared the sheriff.

"Nobody's tryin' to," said Sad. "Let's go ahead with the sale."

"Yeah, let's go on with it," agreed Bunty.

The sheriff noticed that Sad had a big book under his left arm.

"What's the idea of the book, Sontag?"

"The book of wisdom," Sad said soberly. "It might answer a question that's been botherin' me quite a lot. You see, I've been wonderin' who stole them Bar S cattle."

"Are you lookin' for the answer in a book?" asked Bill Wyatt sarcastically.

"Maybe." Sad considered Bill thoughtfully. "Say, we was up to your place yesterday, after the red steer busted up your party. You've got quite a place, Wyatt. Judgin' the number of Box Eight cattle in the hills, you must be doin' well."

Bill Wyatt did not reply, but shot a glance at Snipe and Abe, who plainly were wishing that they were somewhere else.

"Yes sir, you seem to be doin' well," repeated Sad. "You don't brand very deep, do you?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Bill.

"Just what I said. Beauty may only be skin-deep, but a brand sure ought to go into the epidermis."

"I don't get your drift." Bill spoke evenly and straightened up. "If this is a sale—let's sell somethin' and have it over."

He climbed down off the fence and leaned against the nearest post. Several more got down, Bunty O'Neil among them.

"I made my bid," said Sad. "Is somebody goin' to raise it?"

"Those cattle are worth more than that," declared Bunty.

"Go ahead and bid more," growled Wheezer. "Nobody stoppin' you, Bunty."

"I ain't goin' to bid on what already belongs to me."

"Does it belong to you?" asked Sad.

"You're damned right it does! I've got the notes to show it right here." Bunty slapped his pocket. "I've got enough owin' to me to more than cover the ranch and everything on it!"

"Let me see one?" demanded Sad.

"Let you see nothin'!"

"I don't believe you've got a note," persisted Sontag.

"That so?" Bunty said drily. "Well, I have. The sheriff has seen 'em, and so has a lot of other folks."

"Say!" snorted Wyatt. "These two men here tried to steal a steer from me yesterday, and the sheriff arrested 'em, but they got away. Why don't he arrest 'em agin?"

"That's my business!" snapped Buck Rainey.

"What's the idea, Buck?" asked Gilroy, the rancher.

"I don't know." Buck shook his head.

"Scared of 'em," jeered Bill Wyatt.

"It was your steer," reminded Wheezer. "Why don't you do somethin', Bill? Are you handcuffed?"

"I still think that you ought to show them notes, Bunty," said Sad, paying no attention to Bill Wyatt.

"Why?" demanded Bunty.

"I don't believe they're any good, Bunty."

"You don't, eh?" Bunty took an assortment of papers from his inside coat pocket. "Then take a look at one!"

SAD accepted the folded sheet of paper and looked it over. It was a properly constructed ninety-day note for twenty-six hundred dollars, and signed by Jim Steeb. Sad opened the book and looked at something on the fly-leaf.

"Was Jim Steeb sober when he signed this note?" he asked.

"As sober as a judge," declared Bunty. "I didn't want any slip in my dealin's with him, Sontag. I never let him sign a note when he was drunk. Are you satisfied?"

"Nope." Sad looked up from the book and motioned to Speck.

"Speck, I want to ask you a question."

Speck came willingly, and Sad held out the book to him.

"Do you remember that book, Speck?"

"Sure. My dad gave it to me last Christmas."

"You see, gents, he recognizes the book," said Sad. He opened it at the fly-leaf. "Was your dad sober when he wrote that, Speck?"

The boy nodded quickly. "He never was drunk at home, Mr. Sontag."

Sad closed the book, placed it on the ground and held the note out to the sheriff.

"Take a look at that, will you, Sheriff. I'm goin' to ask Bunty to show us the rest of 'em."

"The rest of 'em?" parroted Bunty. "What you mean?"

"The rest of the notes, Bunty," said Sad evenly.

"What for?"

"Because those notes are all signed 'Jim Steeb.'"

"Signed . . . Why, you damned fool,

that was his name!" Bunty hunched forward, reaching inside his coat, as though to comply with Sad's request.

"Yeah, his name was Steeb," said Sad, narrowly watching Bunty. "Anyway, that's the way it's pronounced, Bunty. Your notes are signed S-t-e-e-b, but on the fly-leaf of that book, it says 'To my little son on Christmas Eve, from his father, and—" Sad hesitated—"it's signed James S-t-e-i-b! You dirty coyote, you tried to steal the Bar S, and you probably killed James S-t-e-i-b!"

Bunty's hand flipped from beneath his coat, holding a heavy revolver instead of the package of notes, but Sad had suspected that Bunty was wearing a shoulder-holster, and his draw was just enough faster to spoil things for Bunty O'Neil.

Sad's gun spouted lead from his hip. The bullet yanked Bunty sideward, throwing him against the corral fence, while the six-shooter flipped away in the dust. His shoulder was broken.

But his spirit remained unbroken. He cursed wickedly, but no one cared what he thought. He had admitted his guilt when he had drawn his gun.

Bill Wyatt's eyes grew hard, and he shot a meaning glance at Snipe and Abe.

X

THE SHERIFF went to Bunty, reached inside his coat and took out the rest of the papers. Bunty cursed him fluently, but the sheriff paid no attention. The others crowded around and watched the sheriff compare the signatures on the notes with that in the book. He turned to Speck, a grin on his face.

"Speck, I reckon you get your ranch back. Your dad didn't know how much of a Christmas present he was givin' you when he wrote in that book."

"Well, he don't get much, at that," said Bill Wyatt.

Sad grinned at Bill. "Don't he? Come here, Swede."

Swede came forward, upended the gunnysack, and dumped out a fresh skin. It was the hide of the belligerent red steer. Swede spread it out on the ground.

"Remember that critter, Sheriff?" asked Sad.

"That's one of my steers!" exclaimed Bill angrily.

"Yeah, it sure is," agreed Wheezer. "That's the one we filled with lead yesterday. I'd remember that red steer anywhere."

"What's the big idea?" demanded the sheriff.

"We went back and skinned it," said Sad casually. "You jiggers were so mad you wouldn't even collect the meat. We had some nice steaks for supper."

"You got a lot of nerve!" snorted Bill. "Tried to steal—"

"Don't talk out of turn," advised Sad. "Sheriff, examine that brand, but before you do, I'd like to say that we know where the body of old Eph Wyatt is. He lived long enough to help us figure out who shot him. He had only one livin' relative. That relative would naturally inherit the Diamond W when the old man died. But when Eph declared his intentions of adoptin' Speck, it was a cinch that Speck would get the Diamond W. So this lone livin' relative . . . Don't move, Wyatt! Keep your hands where they are. You shot old Eph Wyatt from ambush. You and Bunty O'Neil had a fallin' out, so you stole the Bar S cattle and changed the Bar S to the Box 8. You branded some with an iron, but a lot of 'em were hair-branded in your brandin' chute. You fool, the floor of that chute looks like the floor of a barber-shop after Saturday's work . . . Keep your hands—"

But Bill Wyatt had no idea of putting up a fight. He darted for the corner of the corral, but stopped with a lurch. Standing there regarding him calmly was old Eph Wyatt. For Bill it was like looking at a ghost—the ghost of the man he had tried to kill. Bill stared at him, turned back and walked unsteadily to the sheriff. It seemed as though Bill Wyatt were surrendering. But he was not.

Suddenly he grasped the sheriff, whirled him around, grasped him by the back of the shirt and shoved his gun into the sheriff's back.

"Keep back!" he snarled at the crowd. "Make one fool move and I'll drill Buck Rainey. Now, Buck, you can back up."

There was nothing for Buck to do except follow orders. The two began backing away slowly, while the crowd, afraid to make a move for fear Bill would kill Buck Rainey, stood and watched them widen the distance. Wheezer and Slim had moved in behind Snipe and Abe and quietly taken their guns before either of the Box 8 boys realized it.

"Look at Bunty O'Neil!" gasped Sad.

The wounded gambler had managed to get to his feet and had his revolver. No one had bothered to pick it out of the dust, because everyone thought that Bunty was too badly hurt even to attempt to recover it.

Bunty's right arm was swinging loosely, his face was the color of wood-ashes, but he was making unsteadily for the sheriff and Bill Wyatt.

"Go back, you damn fool!" commanded Bill.

Bunty shook his head, gripping the heavy gun in his left hand.

"Damn the sheriff!" he grunted. "His life don't mean nothin' to me. I'm after you, Wyatt. You doublecrossed me, you coyote!"

Bill swung the sheriff around toward Bunty. He was afraid to swing further, because it would give the crowd a chance to shoot him in the back.

"Go back, Bunty!" warned Bill. "I'll kill you if you don't stop!"

Bunty laughed hollowly, but did not stop. Handling the big six-shooter in his left hand, the swinging muzzle was as much of a menace to Buck Rainey as it was to Bill Wyatt.

Suddenly Bill fired at Bunty, but missed. The bullet tore a splinter from the corral fence, and a steer bawled in pain. "Your luck is gone, Bill," said Bunty unsteadily.

"Like hell it has! I'll show you who's got the luck."

Wyatt and the sheriff were backing faster now. It was evident that Wyatt was trying to draw far enough away to make a break for the brush. And the crowd was powerless to stop him, unless they were willing to take a chance on Buck Rainey's life.

BILL fired again at Bunty, who almost went to his knees, but recovered.

Suddenly little Speck Steib darted from the corner of the stable, circling behind Bill and the sheriff.

"Don't yell!" cautioned Sad. "Bill don't see him."

Bill Wyatt was unaware that the youngster had sprawled in the dirt not more than six feet directly behind him. He was too interested in his own getaway. If he could hold the crowd back until he gained the brush, the odds would be in his favor.

Bunty was laughing drunkenly, as he reeled ahead. The sheriff knew that death was behind him, and he was almost as afraid of Bunty's erratic gun muzzle as he was of Bill Wyatt's threats. In fact, he was a trifle more worried about Bunty, because Bill would not shoot the man as long as he obeyed orders.

They had backed almost into Speck now, as Bunty's advance forced them to increase their backward pace. Suddenly Bill Wyatt's heels struck the prostrate body, and the boy's arms wrapped in a tight grip around his boots.

Wyatt cursed viciously, tried to catch his balance, but he had been going too fast. The sheriff backed into him, and both went down in a heap on top of Speck. Into them fell Bunty O'Neil.

Sad Sontag was running toward them as Wyatt's heels first struck Speck, and by the time the three men had piled up, Sad was there, followed by the rest of the crowd, except Wheezer, who was making sure that Snipe Lee and Abe Snow would not escape.

But Sad was not quick enough to prevent Bunty O'Neil's vengeance. There came the muffled report of a revolver shot before the crowd could yank the men apart.

The sheriff got to his feet unhurt when they dragged Butny O'Neil aside. Speck, covered with dust and blood, crawled from beneath Bill Wyatt, spitting dirt and blinking.

But Bill Wyatt did not get up. The crowd stood around and looked at him and at Bunty O'Neil, who was far gone now. The sheriff grabbed Speck and hugged him, while Speck dug both fists in his eyes, trying to remove enough dirt to enable him to see what had happened.

Old Eph Wyatt came and looked down at his nephew. No one questioned the old man. They just seemed to take it for granted that everything would be explained.

Speck blinked at him foolishly, his eyes filled with dust tears.

"I—I kind of bull-dogged him, didn't I?" asked Speck.

"Boy, you sure did," said Buck Rainey. "You done just the right thing at the right time. If there's goin' to be any adoptin' done, I'd like to have a chance at it."

"I reckon I come first," said old Eph Wyatt quickly.

Speck looked at them, a half-grin on his face.

"I'm much obliged to you," he said. "I've got to think about it."

"Well, he gets the Bar S all back, don't he?" queried Sad. "It looks to me like you'd have to pick out all them changed brands and turn 'em back to the Bar S."

The sheriff nodded. "Speck gets 'em all."

"Snipe Lee says he'd like to talk," stated Wheezer.

"I just wanted to say," said Snipe, "that me and Abe didn't have nothin' to do with shootin' at the old man. Bill never told us he did that, but he was awful sore about old Eph goin' to adopt the kid. I reckon Bill done the shootin'. He rode away that day with a rifle."

"What about the cattle stealin'?" asked Buck Rainey.

"We done it, Buck. When Bill registered that Box Eight brand, he had the idea of stealin' Bar S cattle. It was plumb easy to change the brand. Then Bunty O'Neil came to Oreana. Him and Bill were old friends. Bunty pointed out that he had a better scheme to get the Bar S Ranch, and he said it would be safer, so we quit pickin' up the Bar S cattle. Bunty and Bill had trouble and it looked like Bunty was goin' to hog the whole works, so we tried to spoil his game by stealin' all the cattle. We branded what we could in the time we had, but the bulk of the cattle are back in a box canyon, where we were goin' to finish the job. Me and Abe plead guilty. We never got a cent, and we didn't steal because we expected to be paid, but to help Bill get even with Bunty O'Neil."

"They're both even now," said Sad. "I reckon there ain't much left for anybody to do. The sale is all off, unless Speck wants to sell somethin'."

"I ain't sellin'," boasted Speck. "I reckon I'll raise cows."

THEY packed the two dead men on their horses and prepared to take them to Oreana. One of the boys opened the corral gate and let the cattle drift. Speck picked up the scattered notes and the big book, which had proved Bunty's duplicity.

"Are you goin' to town with us, Speck?" asked the sheriff.

Speck shook his head. "No, I reckon I'll stay home, Sheriff. I thought maybe Mr. Sontag and Mr. Harrigan might stay all night with me and kind of help me get started."

"Speck, you've got the whole town of Oreana to help you, if you need help."

"Maybe I have now." Speck was wise beyond his years. "These two men helped me when Oreana wouldn't."

Buck rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "That's right, Speck. They sure were against you for bein' an orphan."

The crowd all shook hands with them, and the cavalcade moved back down the road. Old Eph Wyatt was the last to go.

"I'm glad it turned out the way it did," he said. "I lose a son—maybe. If we could combine the two ranches, it might be a good thing for both of us. I'm gettin' old, and I need a young man around the place."

"I'll be over," said Speck. "Maybe we might work out a deal."

The old man laughed, climbed on his horse, and rode away. Speck led the way for Sad and Swede to the porch of the ranchhouse, carrying the book and notes. He sat down and the two cowpunchers sat down on each side of him, while he looked over the papers.

"I can't read much," he confessed sadly. "I never had much chance to go to school. Dad worried a lot about it. He said that education was somethin' I needed pretty bad." He opened the book at the fly-leaf and looked at the penciled writing. "What does that say?" he asked.

Sad looked curiously at the boy and shot a quick glance at Swede.

"It says, 'To my little son on Christmas Eve, from his father, James Steib,'" said Sad.

"Uh-huh." Speck grew thoughtful as he looked at the notes. "Is my father's name written on these, too?"

"Sure. They forged his name, Speck."

"You mean that they wrote it on without him knowin' it?"

"That's the idea. Bunty knew he was in bad when I showed him the name in the book. I had an idea that he was a crook, but it took a lot of schemin' to prove it."

"Uh-huh." Speck hardly understood. He pointed at the writing on the fly-leaf. "Who wrote that?"

"Well, I—uh—your father must—" Sad shifted his feet and looked appealingly at Swede, whose eyes widened humorously.

"That's a kind of funny," mused Speck. "My dad never knew how to write. He was ashamed of it and never let folks know. That's why he always wanted me to learn."

A short lead pencil in Sad's pocket seemed to grow warm and he shifted nervously.

"But—but his name was spelled S-t-e-i-b," said Sad. "I saw it on an old letter I found in the house."

"Maybe," Speck nodded. "My mother could read. After she went away, me and Dad had a hard time. I don't *sabe* who wrote that stuff in the book, 'cause Dad couldn't."

"Let's figure it was fate, Speck," said Sad softly.

"Who is fate, Mr. Sontag?"

"He's the hombre who tied the tin can on Boze."

"Aw, that was Bill Wyatt."

"You can't see fate, Speck."

The kid got to his feet and walked into the house. Sad tore the fly-leaf from the book, wadded up the notes and put them in his pocket.

He and Swede looked at each other.

"Will we head for Sundown, or stay and see that the kid gets started out right?" asked Sad.

"Maybe we"—Swede grinned—"we better leave it to fate."

So fate nodded and they decided to stay.

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Good-by, Old Paint!

WHILE the horse may never go the way of the passenger pigeon, Old Paint is actually on the downgrade at a very fast rate. And if he disappears from the map of America it will not be for the first time, for bones of Eohippus, the prehistoric horse, have been discovered here, though he disappeared half a milllion years ago.

The modern horse was brought to America only a few hundred years ago, but he was such a useful animal that his numbers increased until he reached his peak of usefulness in 1915. At that time there were in the United States alone a total of more than 21 million horses counted in the official census.

The horse census for the year 1950 shows a total of only about a quarter of that number, or about 5 million head.

But the number is shrinking fast, for the 1950 figures were half a million short of the figures of the year before. And the value of the horse per head is also shrinking. The average price per head in 1950 was $45.70, a decrease of $6.60 below the previous year.

The lowly mule is also losing ground, but he at least has one thing to bray about. He would bring twice the price of a horse, or $99.40 to be exact.

—*Allan K. Echols*

Lawmen Shouldn't Sleep

By JAMES CORGAN

An old ex-Ranger finds a sudden exhilarating tonic in a Deputy Sheriff's badge!

MARK TREADWAY sat in a chair propped up against the front wall at the right side of the big open door of the livery stable. The night was dark and cloudy and it looked as if it would rain before morning. He could tell by the way those old bullet wounds in his left leg and right arm ached.

It was a quiet night in Festival. Across the wide, single street of the little cowtown, lights gleamed through the windows and above and below the swinging doors of the Last Chance Saloon. Most of the other buildings were dark. Ten o'clock and only the saloon, hotel, sheriff's office, and livery stable showed any signs of life. Everything else was closed.

On the plank walk, a figure came toward the stable, shadowy in the darkness. The footsteps sounded slow and heavy to Treadway as he sat watching and waiting. Sheriff Lem Hunter was getting old. You could tell it by the way he walked, the way his thin body slumped as though he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders.

"Evening, Sheriff," the stable keeper said as the lawman drew closer.

"Howdy, Mark," Sheriff Hunter said. "The Rangers catch any badmen today?"

"Not any," Treadway replied, trying to keep the weariness out of his tone. "Left that for the sheriff to do."

It was an old joke between them, even though Treadway had tired of it long ago. After all, when you had once been a Texas Ranger you had a lot of respect for the men of that organization. Lem Hunter seemed to think it funny to hint

Treadway landed a hard right

that an old county sheriff could handle badmen better than the Rangers. But by now, the jest was wearing thin.

How many years had it been now since Mark Treadway had been forced to retire from the Rangers because of his bad leg? He had bought the livery stable here in Festival nine years—ten years ago—it was hard to remember. Yet he felt a man wasn't really old at fifty.

"There's something wrong about this town tonight, Mark," the sheriff said. "We're in for trouble of some sort, though I don't know just what it will be. I've felt it in my bones all evening."

"Trouble," Treadway repeated.

He liked the sound of it. There had been times when it had been constantly part of his nights and days. When a man was always careful to keep his back to the wall in strange saloons and eating places. There were gunmen who only had nerve enough to shoot a Texas Ranger in the back.

"If we only knew what was going to happen we could be ready," Hunter said.

TREADWAY had been waiting at least six years for this moment. "We—" he echoed. "I thought the Rangers, even an ex-Ranger could let the sheriff take care of things around here!"

"You know I was just joking about that, Mark," the sheriff said. "I always have been." He peered about him in the darkness as though seeing ghosts of the gunsmoke years. He had been a good lawman, and tough on outlaws. "I want you to do me a favor—to make me a promise, Mark."

"All right, Lem," Treadway said. "Anything you say." This was a tired old man pleading with him. Hunter must be nearly seventy now. "What is it?"

"You know I haven't had any deputy since Bub Chapman quit last year and decided to be a rancher," Hunter said. "Things have been so quiet I didn't need one. Now I am asking you to let me appoint you my deputy, Mark. Of course I don't expect you to do anything now, but I would like to make it official for you to take over for a time if anything should happen to me."

"Nothing is going to happen to you, Lem." Treadway got to his feet, a big man with a good bit of gray in his thick dark hair. His hands touched his levis at the thighs seeking holstered guns that were no longer there. "But if it will make you feel better swear me in."

"Raise your right hand," said the sheriff.

He voiced the oath of office and had Treadway repeat it after him. Then the sheriff produced a deputy's badge from his pocket and pinned it to the stable owner's shirt.

"All right, Mark," Hunter continued. "Now you are officially my deputy. It is understood there is no work connected with the job unless you should have to take over for me."

"I hope that never happens." Treadway suddenly felt strangely uneasy. He unpinned the deputy badge. "If you don't mind, I'll just keep this in my pocket until it is needed, Lem."

"Might be a good idea, at that," Hunter said. "Your being my deputy will come as a surprise to some folks that way." The sheriff frowned. "I've got to get back to my office. Have some paper work to do. See you later, Mark."

The old sheriff turned and walked slowly back down the street. His shoulders sagged, and he still seemed old and tired to Treadway as he watched. The stable keeper was puzzled. Lem Hunter usually considered himself quite sufficient when it came to being the Law in this county. It was strange he should suddenly feel that he needed a deputy.

"I don't like it," Treadway muttered. "Lem acts like he knows he hasn't much longer to live. No, I don't like it at all."

The uneasiness was still strong within him as Mark Treadway went back into the big livery stable. In their stalls the horses he kept for rent moved restlessly as though sensing something was wrong. The surrey, the buggy and the buckboard standing on the stable floor were odd shapes in the dim light of the oil lamp burning high on a pole.

Treadway went into his office and closed the door. There was an oil lamp burning there on his desk. He opened a trunk in one corner of the room and drew out two cartridge-belts that were heavy from the weight of the Colt .45's in the holsters.

IT HAD been a long time since he had worn those guns, but he had always kept them oiled and cleaned and ready for action. He buckled on the belts, adjusted the holsters on his hips. His hands flashed down and the guns came up. He smiled. He hadn't lost any of his skill.

He thrust the guns back into leather as he heard voices. He opened the door and stepped out. Two men dressed in range clothes stood just inside the big entrance door of the stable. Treadway knew them both and didn't like them.

The big man who wore no hat, and had close cropped hair and an ugly face was Joe Spalding, owner of a little horse ranch ten miles south of Festival. The other man was Hank Wilson, a shifty-eyed individual who worked for Spalding. "Oh, there you are, Treadway," Spalding said. "Heard you bought a new horse yesterday."

"I did," Treadway answered quietly. "News sure travels fast around here. Did you two come to congratulate me or do you think I made a bad deal?"

"What's the horse look like?" Spalding snapped.

"A bay with a blaze face," Treadway said. "And about three years old."

"I thought so!" snarled Spalding. "That's one of the horses that were stolen from my ranch three days ago."

"Sure," said Treadway. "You happen to own the only bay with a blaze face in all this part of the country? Unhuh, and you are the only man in all the West who ever carried a Colt forty-five!"

"I don't like the way he acts, Joe," Hank Wilson said. "Strikes me as mighty suspicious."

Treadway stepped forward. He had been standing in the shadows just outside the door of his office. For the first time the two men noticed the two guns that he wore. Spalding blinked and glanced quickly at his companion. Wilson frowned and looked unhappy.

"Of course we might be mistaken," Spalding said. "You mind showing us the horse, Treadway?"

"Not at all," said the stable owner. "He's right over there in that first stall. Go ahead and take a good look."

He remained right where he was as the two men walked over to the stall and peered at the horse. They took some time about it. Treadway waited patiently.

"That's him," said Spalding, swinging around and walking back toward Treadway. "That's the bay that was stolen from my ranch.

"It sure is," said Wilson. "I'd recognize that horse anywhere."

"I didn't think you would have the nerve to keep a stolen horse right here in town, Treadway," Spalding said.

"Right careless of me, wasn't it," Treadway said dryly. "Maybe I just kept him around in case I ran into a couple of liars like you two."

"Liars!" snarled Wilson.

He reached for his gun. Treadway lunged forward, caught Wilson's right wrist and gave it a twist. Wilson's hat fell off and his gun went flying across the stable floor to disappear beneath the front wheels of the surrey. Treadway released his grip on Wilson's wrist and swung around to face Spalding, who changed his mind about drawing his gun.

"I said liars and I repeated it," Treadway said. "I've had that bay you just identified for three years and the horse happens to be a mare. The horse I bought yesterday was a pinto, and I have a bill of sale for him from the Leaning L boss, Tom Lee. He sold me the horse!"

Spalding cursed and lunged at Treadway. The stable keeper landed a hard right to the rancher's chin. Spalding reeled back and then dropped.

"All right, Wilson," Treadway said, turning to face the other man. "Soon as your boss recovers we'll go see Sheriff Hunter about this. I'm curious as to why you two have been so anxious to start trouble with me. Reckon Hunter will find a way to make you talk."

"That isn't necessary," Wilson said nervously. "We made a mistake. That's all. I was plumb certain that was the stolen horse there in the stall. It seems that I was wrong."

SPALDING opened his eyes and then got slowly to his feet. He looked anxiously at the stable keeper. It was quite evident he had no desire to continue the fight.

"Treadway wants us to go see the sheriff, Joe," Wilson said. "I been telling him there's no need to do that."

Treadway stared at a large roll of

bills that evidently had fallen out of Spalding's pocket. It looked like a lot of money in that roll. "You dropped something, Spalding," he said.

"Huh?" Spalding glanced down, saw the money and picked it up and put it in a pocket of his levis. "Thanks."

"All right." Treadway drew his right hand gun and covered the two men. "Now we go see the sheriff. March, and don't argue about it!"

Spalding and Wilson headed out of the stable with Treadway following closely behind them, the gun ready in his hand. He felt more uneasy than ever as they went toward the sheriff's office.

He could only think of one reason for these two accusing him of stealing, or at least buying a stolen horse, and trying to start a quarrel with him. It was to establish an alibi. But why did they need one? From the first Wilson had been nervous and frightened when Treadway suggested they go see the sheriff. Did that mean they had killed Lem Hunter? Mark Treadway did not know yet, but he was terribly worried.

They reached the sheriff's office. Inside an oil lamp gleamed and the door stood wide open. Hunter was slumped forward across his desk.

"So I was right," Treadway said, his voice harsh with the bitterness that swept over him. "You killed him."

"You're crazy," Spalding said. "If anyone killed the sheriff, we sure didn't do it."

Treadway stepped forward, going to the still figure at the desk. Spalding and Wilson were apparently forgotten for the moment. The rancher saw his chance and snatched out his gun.

"You're not holding us for this killing, Treadway," he snapped, covering the stable keeper with the gun.

"That's right," said Wilson as Treadway swung around to face them. "We watched the sheriff go into his office just before we went into the hotel. That wasn't more than twenty minutes ago. Then we came right to the stable."

There were footsteps outside. Someone running along the plank walk. "Hey, Sheriff!" a voice shouted. "Two masked men robbed the hotel, knocked out Gus Ward the night clerk and got away with a thousand dollars!"

JOE SPALDING suddenly turned as he heard the voice. Treadway's gun was still in his hand. It came up, roaring. Spalding dropped his own weapon as the ex-Ranger's bullet got him in the right arm.

"What in the ringtailed blue blazes!" Sheriff Hunter sat up, and stared about him dazedly. "Can't a man take a nap without folks shooting off guns?"

"When you sleep you sure don't fool about it, Lem," Treadway drawled. "Sure was a relief when I got close enough to see you were breathing right easy-like. For a time I thought someone had killed you."

"Hey, Sheriff," shouted the local citizen who had been doing all the yelling as he burst into the office. "The hotel has been robbed. Two masked men knocked out Gus Ward, stole a thousand dollars."

"We know," Treadway said. "We've got the holdup men right here." He nodded to Spalding and Wilson. "Wilson admitted that they went into the hotel just about the time the robbery must have taken place, and Spalding is carrying a big roll of money."

"It was all Spalding's idea," Wilson said quickly. "He's been going broke out at the ranch and needed some extra cash in a hurry. He figured if we robbed the hotel, then hurried over to the stable and picked a quarrel with Treadway about a stolen horse, no one would suspect us."

"Had a feeling something was going to happen tonight," said the sheriff, smiling at Treadway. "Then I had to fall asleep and miss all the excitement. I was right in thinking I needed a deputy, and I'm sure glad I have one."

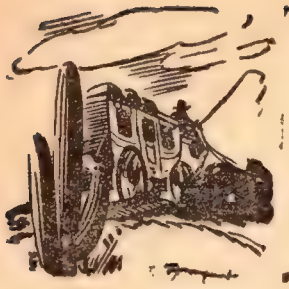
"What deputy?" Wilson queried.

"Me!" Treadway took out his badge and pinned it on. "And you two have been under arrest ever since you started to pick a fight with me at the stable."

He felt good. Better than he had in the last ten years. His bad leg and arm hardly bothered him at all. The sheriff sent the local citizen for a doctor to take care of Spalding's wounded arm. Then the old lawman smiled at his deputy.

"The Rangers catch any badmen today, Mark?" he asked.

"Two," Treadway said. It was strange how good that old joke sounded now that it had a different answer!



THE STAGE COACH

A Cargo of Range News and Oddities

WHO hasn't read of sourdough bread, staple foodstuff of the Western pioneers? A century ago the sourdough can, its contents slopping in yeasty ferment, was standard equipment hung from an axle underneath the creaking covered wagons that crossed the prairies of the West.

Properly cooked the stuff is still good outdoor eating. The sourings, or "starter," can be easily prepared. Recipes vary, but here is one of the best.

Take two cups of flour, two tablespoonsful of sugar and one of salt. Mix with enough water to form a thin batter. Let stand in the sun or other warm place to sour. A tablespoonful of vinegar or a grated potato will hasten the souring. Let the starter work for two days at least before using.

Once started, the sourings are a permanent proposition because when you make a batch of bread some of the starter is always left in the can or pail and a little flour and warm water added. The sourings keep on fermenting, ready for the next bread batch.

To make the bread use a cup of starter. Add half a teaspoonful of salt and about the same amount of soda. Never baking powder. Add flour, a small amount at a time until you have a dough thick enough to be kneaded. Knead the dough on a board until thick enough to be elastic. Form into small loaves. Lard or bacon grease melted and rubbed over the top of the loaves will give your bread a tasty crust when baked.

Set the loaves in a warm place. Let them rise to double their original size. Then bake in a medium hot oven until the crust is golden brown. Oven baking is for cabin camp cooking. For outdoor campfire baking use a reflector baker or a Dutch oven.

If you use a Dutch oven have it well preheated but not smoking hot, and be sure both bottom and sides have been well greased before putting in your bread. Have the iron cover of the Dutch oven hot too.

Then set the oven in a deep bed of hot embers. Put the cover in place upside down and fill the depression or saucer this makes with more hot wood coals. Keep top and bottom packed with glowing coals to insure an even heat. Baking time is about forty to sixty minutes.

SAGEBRUSH sounds romantic in a Western song. But no matter how appealing this squat, bushy plant appears to a visiting dude it is a range pest to cowmen engaged in the serious business of putting juicy steaks on range-raised beef cattle. Lately some Western cattlemen have gone in for mowing acres of sage-infested range on a wholesale scale. Spring mowing eradicates, or at least aids in controlling sagebrush, and the better forage grasses that grow in its place, once the sage has been eliminated, put more pounds on beef cattle. That means more economical use of the range.

Nevertheless it will be a long time before sagebrush entirely disappears from the millions of acres of Western range which is its natural habitat.

PIONEER PLACER MINERS were good at solving their own puzzles. In their constant problem of determining whether or not a stream held enough water for washing gold-bearing gravel through their sluice boxes they devised a handy system of rough-estimating the water flow in any small watercourse. It is a method modern prospectors and other outdoorsmen still find useful. The old-timers simply dropped a small twig or wooden match in a part of the current flowing at average speed. Then they measured how many feet the twig or match floated downstream in a minute. Next they estimated the average depth of the stream, and its width in feet.

By multiplying the three figures together and deducting ten per cent if the stream bottom was smooth, twenty per cent if it was rough, a very close approximation could be obtained of the stream's water flow in cubic feet per minute at the point of measurement.

HELL and HOT LEAD

1

THE WIND, sighing dismally along Caprock's false-fronted street, swept down across the prairie with the teeth of winter in it. Yet the tall, leathery man who bucked it along the boardwalk was oblivious to the icy blast. He was a man whose thoughts had turned inwardly, as he strode toward the meeting hall on the cowtown's outskirts, who might be on his way to pronounce his own doom.

His name was Henry Harlow McGrath, but Montana knew him from the Marias to the Yellowstone as "Hellvation Hank" McGrath, a circuit-riding sky pilot who might christen a baby and thrash a bully all in the same morning, doing each chore with a zealot's thoroughness. A fighting preacher, this Hellvation Hank. Now there was a new battle for him, but it was not just another fight. Not when a man had to choose between loyalty to a friend on his duty as he saw it.

Yet his decision was made and Hellvation Hank shouldered purposefully into the meeting hall which was his church when he chose so to use it. The place was narrow and dark and benches served as pews while a raised platform with a table was the only altar. The room was packed and there was a restless stir at his entrance as though the excitement that gripped Caprock was concentrated here.

Excitement! It was only a shadow of things to come, McGrath reflected as he glimpsed Tyler Whitman in the congregation. Wherever Whitman was there'd be excitement, for he was presi-

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All fighters aren't killers—as the Gospel Kid shows when he pounds a justice trail to avenge his sky pilot brother!

A NOVEL BY NORMAN A. FOX

Bottsinger's fists lashed out

dent of Montana-Pacific, the roaring railroad that had pushed across the untamed Dakotas with the end of steel already nearing Caprock. There'd be a new boom in Caprock with grading contracts for those who wanted them, and beef contracts to supply the hungry crews with food. The town was a magnet to draw the reputable and the disreputable, the forces of good and the powers of evil.

The sky pilot, a bony man, gray-headed and looking older than his forty-odd years, took his place behind the table. He dragged a Bible from a cavernous pocket of his shapeless black coat, but did not open it. Instead he stood there with the Book in his hand, his face calm and emotionless.

"I'll use no text tonight," he announced. "It's not the Sabbath, and it's not a sermon I'm here to preach. I bring you a warning."

A gusty sigh rippled across his congregation and he waited.

"You are a happy people," he said then. "You know that a dream long cherished by most of us is to be realized. The railroad is coming to Caprock. We will see a boom while the end of steel is here and we'll see a more enduring prosperity afterward. Ranchers will be able to ship cattle to Eastern markets without losing the profit on the way. Mines will open in the Big Thunders and those mountains will surrender their riches. A day we have long awaited will come, a day I have prayed to see, since with it will come law and order. Our Eden is almost within reach. But like the Eden of old, it has its serpent. Our serpent is a three-headed one."

HE PAUSED, studying the faces before him, hearing the creak of benches, seeing neighbor stare covertly at neighbor.

"Three men," he said bluntly, "will stoop to any means to keep Montana-Pacific from crossing the Big Thunders. They are men who think only of themselves. Their names are known to me. Part of their plans are known to me. By the grace of God, I am sometimes His instrument of mercy. One fallen brother I cannot name, told me of these three. The secret is mine."

There was a subtle change in his voice while a zealot's fire gave life to his bony face. "I do not say these three are here," he went on. "But my word will reach them. I give them one week to mend their ways. Let them come to me and prove their repentance and the matter shall be forever forgotten. If they choose, instead, to go on their sinful way, I shall have no choice. One week from tonight I shall stand here and expose them for what they are. Good night, my friends. May God go with you."

He was down from the platform before a man moved and, as was his custom, stationed himself at the door to shake each person's hand as he left. The first man out was gray-headed Thackery Weaver, editor of the Caprock *Tribune*. He was scribbling notes, so intent that he did not see McGrath's outstretched hand.

After the editor came Tyler Whitman, a soldierly man who looked uncomfortable in white silk shirt and broadcloth. With him was sun-tanned, poker-faced Kurt Ormond, his chief construction engineer. The railroad builder took McGrath's hand.

"Sorry I've been so busy I haven't had time for a talk with you, Hank," Whitman said. "The years have changed you, my friend. Who'd guess that twenty years ago we were both eating the dust of the drag down on the Brazos? And who'd think that I'd turn out to be a railroad builder and you a gospel shouter?"

"It's been a long time, Ty," said Hellvation Hank, the warmth of genuine affection in his smile.

Broad-shouldered "Curly" Bottsinger, owner of the stage and freight line in this wild country from the Dakota border to the Big Thunders, brushed past without a word, and after him came fancy-dressed Hoyt Durham, owner of the Golden Slipper Saloon. McGrath re-

garded him with surprise. "Didn't expect to find you at church, Durham," he said.

Durham shrugged. "Why not?" he countered. "I might as well close up my place any time you twist the devil's tail. Seems like you put on a better show than all my percentage girls who—"

It was not so much what he was saying but the way he was saying it that darkened McGrath's face with anger.

"Stop!" he shouted. "You can't mention foulness in the shadow of the House of God!"

"To hell I can't!" Durham said, and spat toward the open doorway.

McGrath hit him then, his fist crashing against Durham's chin. His freshly-lighted cigar showered sparks as it arced away while Durham sprawled backward upon the ground. He came to his feet with killer fury in his eyes but he contented himself with a barbed glance at the sky pilot.

"You'll pay for that some day, gospel-grinder!" he said and stalked off.

Tyler Whitman frowned, but Kurt Ormond was as inscrutable as ever. Now another man was barging from the doorway, a semi-bald old cattleman who plucked at McGrath's sleeve while he crossed palms with Tyler Whitman.

"What the dickens is all the mystery about, Hank?" the cowman demanded. "What's this palaver about three sidewinders? You meanin' me? You know dang well I'm ag'in the cast-iron cayuse that Ty, here, figgers he's goin' to run across this range? You think I want my Deadman range cluttered up with hoemen? That's what the railroad will bring!"

McGrath considered Storm Herndon of the H-in-a-Hat spread with a good-natured smile.

"You're a long way off your range, *amigo*," he observed. "You wouldn't be in Caprock to angle for a railroad beef contract would you, Storm? How's that girl of yours?"

"Lana? She's kickin' over the traces again. Says she's through with Eastern schoolin'. Says she's comin' home next spring whether I like it or not."

Herndon bustled off then. The rest of the congregation paraded down Caprock's street until only Hank McGrath and the two railroad men stood there in the dusk.

"Those three men you mentioned, Hank," Tyler Whitman said. "I'd be mighty interested in knowing their names. Since the Government's promised to subsidize the first railroad to cross the Big Thunders, Central Western has been bucking me every step of the way and it's trouble enough putting the rails through. I've got ways of catching my own rats, Hank, but I'd like to know who you were driving at."

HELLVATION HANK'S leathery face clouded.

"Do you suppose I haven't thought of that, Ty?" he asked. "We're old friends, and those three are striking at the heart of the thing you're trying to do—the thing I want to see you succeed in doing, not for your sake or for mine, but for Montana's. Even when I was walking down here, I was deciding where my duty lay. But I've got my work too. I've got to save men from the wickedness within them. Even those three. They'll have their chance to redeem themselves."

"Maybe so," Whitman conceded drily. "But I've got a trouble-shooter, name of Dan Callishaw, who knows the right way of saving gents from their own

wickedness. But I don't suppose we could see eye to eye on *that*. So long, pard."

They shook hands again, two old friends who had shared their formative years together before each had taken a different trail. Whitman strode away with Kurt Ormond, and the sky pilot bent his footsteps toward his isolated home.

In the clapboard, shack beyond the town, the wind slipped through so that when McGrath lighted a kerosene lamp on the split-log table in the single room, the flame flickered wildly. The sky pilot busied himself at the stove, building a fire mechanically for the magnitude of the challenge he'd made filled his thoughts.

Had he said too much? If there was fear within him, characteristically it wasn't for himself. But he was remembering the man who had first warned him of the three who threatened the Montana-Pacific Railroad. He hadn't intended to jeopardize the fellow.

While he was turning the matter over in his mind he heard a faint sound outside. It was no more than the scrape of a boot sole against the hard-packed earth but it brought McGrath to the door where he peered into the murk.

"Who is it?" he called, then recognized the silent figure a few paces away.

So short a time ago he had asked three men to come to him, and already one of them was here. To repent—or to take advantage? It was like Hellvation Hank to give the man the benefit of the doubt.

"My seed seems to have been cast upon fertile ground," he called. "Won't you come in, my friend?"

His answer came in blossoming gunflame and the crash of a six-gun. Stunned by the tearing, burning impact of the slug, Hellvation Hank spun, teetering on his toes in the doorway for an endless moment before he fell full length upon the ground. And as he sprawled there, the assassin was already slipping away in the darkness.

There was blood on Hellvation Hank's fingers as he clutched his shattered chest and there was a great sadness in his heart—the sadness of Him who said: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." But the fighting heart of Hellvation Hank had its say, too, and its voice was the voice of the anger that was raging in his heart.

He was dying. He had tended too many dying men not to know that his own hour had come. He had defied the evil forces threatening the coming of steel, and those forces had struck him down.

He had made a grave mistake in not giving their names to Tyler Whitman. Now he must warn his friend somehow, name the three, so that Tyler Whitman might guard against them.

There were writing materials in the shack but when he tried to crawl toward the doorway he found his strength was not enough.

He thought to scratch three names in the earth but the ground was hard-packed and defied his faltering fingers. He tried again to reach the doorway and succeeded only in working the Bible out of his pocket where it lay in the yellow splash of light, the cold evening wind fingering the worn old pages.

Looking at the Book, the light of inspiration glowed in the dimming eyes of Hellvation Hank. He flipped the pages he knew so well, turning unerringly to certain passages. These he marked with the only means at hand, smearing the passages with his own life blood.

And his task was finished before his fingers stiffened and his painwracked body lay still.

When morning came the first snow lay like a shroud, blanketing Caprock and the range beyond and sifting softly over the body of Hellvation Hank McGrath.

II

APRIL SMILED upon Caprock range. The rolling prairie, freed from icy fetters, moon-mellowed and alive with the first faint stirrings of spring, spread before the man from Texas who followed the twin rails toward the distant town.

The land that had belonged to the Kiowas, the Choctaws and the Chikasaws had known this lean young rider, and he had breasted the Red, the Brazos, the Washita and all those treacherous streams that intersect the north trail from Texas. He wore cowboy garb

and something in his tanned face proved he had crowded a lot of living into a few brief years. He looked to be a man who could be a good friend or a ruthless enemy. Whistling a toneless tune a hundred bedded herds had known, he swung to cross the trestle spanning Crowfoot Gulch.

Danger awaited him at trail's end, he knew, but that was miles away and he had no inkling of peril as he forced his mount onto the tracks at the end of the trestle. His mount snorted and pawed, skittish of that spidery framework of timber and steel. The man spoke soothingly to the spooked horse. His patience saved his life.

In the center of the trestle a blue flame lashed upward like a devil's forking tongue and the silence of the night was wrenched asunder by a terrific blast, echoing and reechoing along the gulch. Dynamite! A giant's hand slapped horse and rider backward bodily just as the trestle bulged at its middle, then caved drunkenly in the boiling smoke.

A blue flame lashed upward like a devil's tongue

Timbers rained from the sky and the Texan came out of his saddle on the

fringe of that deadly downpour, his first astonishment at finding himself alive changing to a tremendous anger. This outrage was aimed at the Montana-Pacific, of course, but that didn't change the fact that it had almost claimed *his* life. No man could blast him off his horse!

Jerking a gun from beneath his slicker, he ran to the lip of the gulch. Smoke and dust stung his eyes as he peered downward, but faint moonlight filtered through the murky veil. Just below him, about ten feet down, on a ledge, a man hunkered, his back to the Texan.

The man's presence was proof enough that he'd had a hand in the dynamiting and the Texan leaped, landing almost on top of the man. Instantly the fellow jerked around, wrapping brawny arms about the Texan. Then the two of them, locked in deadly embrace, were rolling and struggling on the narrow shelf.

There was no chance for the Texan to use his gun, but his adversary couldn't reach a weapon either. As they waged their silent, deadly fight, the Texan glimpsed his antagonist's face—a round face, seemed and leathery, with a rim of gray hair showing beneath the jammed tight sombrero. He was an oldster, but he was stocky of body and mighty of arm. The Texan, in his mid-twenties, had the advantage of youth but his adversary was all whang leather and fighting with a desperation that made them equals in those first few moments.

Wriggling eel-like from the Texan's grasp, the older man lunged to his feet, tripping over his own spurs. He tottered on the edge of the ledge, clawing at the air, then vanished from view. The Texan pulled himself forward to see the man bounding and rolling downward into the gulch.

The slope was gradual and the oldster was going to stop up against a bush below, none the worse for his experience if luck favored him. There might be a second round of this fight and the Texan, anger still burning, ached to close with the man again. He would have followed him but at that instant he was jerked erect by a distant sound, the mournful wail of a locomotive.

A train was coming! Racing straight for the dynamited trestle! Had the engineer heard the sound of the explosion and guessed what lay ahead? Chances were he hadn't. Frantically the Texan clawed up the slope, starting a miniature avalanche of rocks and dirt until he finally stood panting and disheveled on the rim of the gulch. Then he was sprinting desperately down the track to stop that train.

His horse had bolted and he found it a quarter-mile from the trestle, stamping nervously. He was into the saddle at once, using spurs and the quirt that had been dangling from the saddle-horn. Already the rails were humming and the locomotive's headlight penciled a glare on a distant bluff. The Texan peeled off his slicker. Waving it wildly as he spurred forward, he prayed that the engineer would be alert.

STRAIGHT toward the Texan a bell-stacked engine roared and it took all of the rider's skill to hold his horse on the track, both blinded by the headlights' glow. He heard the squeal of brakes just as he jumped his horse off the track. Then the train—a dozen flatcars of steel with one passenger coach and a pusher engine behind—slid to a noisy stop.

The conductor was on the ground instantly and the engineer deserted his cab. But it was to a tall, soldierly-looking man who swiftly alighted from the passenger coach that the Texan turned. The look of a leader had marked Tyler Whitman for what he was.

"Trestle out—over the gulch!" the Texan panted. "Dynamited!"

"You're sure?" Whitman barked. "Who did it?"

"Couldn't say," the Texan confessed. "I tangled with one of 'em, but he got away. That bridge is shore busted."

A dozen men had crowded down the coach steps and Whitman spun upon them.

"Trestle's out!" he snapped. "You, Hanson! There's an emergency telegraph lay-out in the tool shack back a piece. Notify division headquarters. Tell 'em I want a cleanup crew here by sunup. Hammersmith! Arm six men and have a look around the gulch. While you're there, make an inventory of just

exactly what we'll need."

There were other orders and the lieutenants of the railroad-builder dispersed in a dozen different directions, each with an assignment. There was something of awe and admiration in the Texan's eyes as they followed Whitman.

Someone touched him and he turned to confront a girl who had come from the coach. She had dark hair, framing a face pretty enough to take the Texan's breath away. He was a six-footer, and she came just to his chin, he noticed. Her eyes were blue, he guessed, and big —but not with fear.

"I'm Lana Herndon," she said, and held out her hand. "I want to thank you. You saved the life of every one of us."

He took her hand, small and firm. "I just happened along," he muttered. "It might have been anybody."

He would have liked to say more, but Tyler Whitman, unwittingly broke the spell by appearing suddenly, his hand outstretched.

"And now I've time to thank you properly," the railroad builder said. "For myself—and for the Montana-Pacific. I am Tyler Whitman, head of the road, and I owe you a great deal, sir. If there is anything I can ever do—"

The Texan pawed for the makings. "I could use a job," he said.

Tyler Whitman sized him up and because he had been of this whang-leather breed himself, he smiled.

"What can you do?"

"On a railroad? Reckon a branding iron would grow rusty, and you can't take the kinks out of a cast-iron cayuse. That leaves my fists and my gun."

"A trouble-shooter? I could use a dozen of them. It's a tough chore, man. There's Central Western trying to beat us and other forces buck us as well. Sabotage—agitators in our construction gangs, beef for the graders never arriving, leeches debauching our work crews. Do you want any part of our kind of work?"

"You've just hired yourself a man," said the Texan.

"You've got a horse and you can get to Caprock," said Whitman. Dan Callishaw, my trouble-shooter, is there. Report to him. Tell him I've hired you. He'll give you work to do." He spoke to a man at his elbow with something to report, then swung back. "Your name?" he asked the Texan.

"Name?" said the cowboy. "A man picks up a heap of names on a heap of trails. I packed a Bible up from Texas. I used it in a trail town where there was no preacher to say any words over a dead girl. They called me the Gospel Kid from then on. But if you've got to have something official for the records —put me down as Matt McGrath."

"McGrath!" Whitman echoed, his eyes widening. "I savvy! Hank's kid brother! Now I know why there was something familiar about the lean look of you!"

"The Gospel Kid" grinned. "I got the Bible you sent me, Mr. Whitman, but it was a long time coming. Me, I never had the same address long. Likewise I got your letter. It said Hank had declared a one-man war on three skunks and was shot down."

"I thought you'd want the Bible," Whitman said. "Hank had a Texas address penciled beneath your name on the family record page. I took a chance on that." His eyes narrowed. "You're looking for the men who got Hank! You were joking about working for me!"

ICE GLINTED in the Kid's eyes.

"I crave to look along my gunsights at three gents," he said. "Them three are buckin' the Montana-Pacific, and I work for the road. But there's more to it than that. Hank craved to see a railroad in this country. It was his dream —but he didn't live to see it come true. I'd sorta of like to have a hand in building a railroad for Hank." His voice softened and the ice went from his eyes. "You knew him, Mr. Whitman, but you never knew me. No two men born of the same woman was ever so different as me and Hank. He chose his trail, I chose mine. But he was my brother. See you in Caprock, boss."

He would have turned away then but he felt the tug of Lana Hendon's glance. The look she gave him was stony, and disgust was in it. It troubled the Kid, that look, for it was entirely opposite to her attitude before he had identified himself. Oh, well, he was working for the railroad now and he had his orders.

Shrugging, he stepped up into saddle.

III

IN CAPROCK the next day, the Gospel Kid found a town such as Hellvation Hank had never known. The railroad had come to Caprock and the streets were thronged—graders and gamblers and gunmen, steel-layers and mule-skinners, bridge builders and beef barons, and men whose calling was shady and nameless.

Once this town had known nothing more raucous than the revelry of a ranch crew celebrating pay-day, the bawling of a corraled beef herd awaiting a buyer's inspection. Now a medley of alien sounds made discord. Spring rains had turned the street into a muddy mire and along it moved ponderous freight wagons, the teamsters heaping blistering invective upon the toiling horses. Engines puffed and screamed at the sidings. Hammers and saws pounded and rasped while the drum of boots along the boardwalks was incessant. Caprock had blossomed into a sordid kind of splendor.

The Kid regarded it all, his sombrero thumbed back to reveal a shock of corn-colored hair, his thumbs hooked in his gun-belt. He was fascinated and disgusted at the same time. Yet it wasn't because of a religious leaning. He carried Hellvation Hank's blood-stained Bible in his shirt-front but his own trail had been smoky, and his ways violent.

Shrugging, he headed for the new pine-boarded building that was the railroad's office. A squat red-faced, red-headed Irishman who sat hunched over a telegraph instrument, gave him the information he wanted.

"Dan Callishaw?" the telegrapher repeated. "Sure and it's up at the Drovers Rest ye'll be finding him. And yez can tell him Key O'Dade says there's a telegram here for him."

"I'm his new assisant," the Kid said. "I'll take it to him."

Key O'Dade regarded him from beneath a green eye-shade. "Then here it is, me bucko," he agreed. "Seeing as it's from Whitman,-confirming the hiring of ye, I guess ye're the man to be delivering it."

At the Drovers Rest, after a word with the desk clerk, the Kid climbed the shabbily-carpeted stairway to drum his knuckles upon a door.

"Come in," called a voice, he stepped inside, to confront a leveled gun.

In this room with its pine bureau, the inevitable pitcher and bowl, and iron bedstead, the man with the gun was the predominating figure—a short stubby fellow of indefinite age with a bulldog jaw and the flaring nostrils of a fighting man.

"Who are you?" he asked testily. "And what's your business?"

"Reckon this wire will explain," said the Kid.

Dan Callishaw laboriously read the telegram and pouched his gun. He grinned wryly as he extended his hand.

"Plumb sorry," he said. "A man has to be on the prod to keep on living in Caprock. But if Ty Whitman sent you, you're on the right side of the fence. McGrath, is it? No kin to Hellvation Hank?"

"Brother," said the Kid. "You knew him?"

Callishaw shook his head. "Heard a heap about him, though. I wasn't sent here until after Hank died. Whitman and Kurt Ormond, his chief engineer, were around here at the time, lining up things. Have a drink?"

The Kid's eyes, growing more accustomed to the semi-gloom, widened with astonishment as he saw what was standing in the corner nearest to the bed. A headboard for a grave—a new headboard made of pine! A precious commodity in this prairie country.

The painted lettering read:

HERE LIES DANIEL CALLISHAW

Born October 2, 18—
Died April 18, 18—

HE WAS WARNED, BUT HE WOULDN'T LISTEN

Callishaw saw the Kid's surprise.

"Now," said the trouble-shooter, "do you see why I unleather my gun before I open the door?"

"What's the idea?" said the Kid. "April eighteenth! Why, that's today!"

"A warning from The Three," Callishaw explained. "For me to get out by today. I found it in this room a couple weeks ago."

"The Three?"

"It's a name we've got for the bunch that's causing the Montana-Pacfic all its grief. Ty Whitman started calling them The Three after Hellvation Hank spoke of three snakes. I find that pretty thing right handy for scratching matches when I hanker to smoke in bed."

BUT THE Kid wasn't fooled. The man was worried—plenty worried. The Kid eyed the headboard again and a quick suspicion narrowed his eyes.

"But that first date?" he observed. "How could they know the date of your birth?"

"Thackery Weaver, the gent who runs the Caprock newspaper, gave me some publicity when I first hit town," Callishaw said. "See it?"

One stubby finger indicated a clipping pinned to the wall and the Kid ran his eyes over it. The heading read "AMONG US TODAY" and obviously was a regular feature of the newspaper. It began:

Dan Callishaw, a representative of the Montana-Pacific Railroad who has lately been assigned to duty in Caprock, has had a colorful career. Callishaw first saw the light of day in Indiana where he was born on October 2nd, 18—. . . .

There was a lurid description of the subsequent doings of Dan Callishaw, trouble-shooter. The Kid's curiosity was satisfied. Anybody in Caprock might have prepared the weird wooden warning.

"You think they'll try for you today?" the Kid asked.

Callishaw shrugged. "Maybe. Probably bluff, though. It's one thing to name the day of a man's death. It's another to make sure he dies on that day. But it sure gives a man something to think about."

The Kid had to agree. He dismissed the matter, eyeing his superior woodenly.

"Where do I start to work?" he asked.

"Work?" said Callishaw. "There'll be work for twenty like us, from now on. It's been a bad winter and M.P. just barely got beyond Caprock. But a new season's opening and we'll be heading for Lazura fast. Then's when hell will start to pop. The dynamite job that Ty mentions in his telegram is just an eye-opener. We could use a troop of soldiers but the Government can't see our need for them, even if a batch of blue-coats are hunkering on their haunches down at Fort Yellowstone. The Union Pacific had soldier protection. That was because the Indians were lifting hair in them days. We're fighting an outfit just as crafty and just as tough!"

He paused, arching one eyebrow. "You eat yet?" he asked abruptly, and the Kid shook his head. "Go get some grub under your belt, McGrath," Callishaw went on. "Then we'll head for the grading camp. Kurt Ormond's at end o' steel complainin' that the crews are dissatisfied and sullen. We'll see if we can stomp the snake that's keeping 'em that way."

That suited the Kid, for inactivity weighed heavily upon him. In a nearby restaurant, a gloomy place smelling of grease and dirt, he found a table for himself. The place was filled and waitresses were hurrying everywhere. While the Kid waited, he took the Bible from his shirt-front and fished into his pockets for a pencil stub and a scrap of paper. The Bible was at his elbow but he didn't refer to it as he scribbled three verses absently:

And there went out a champion of the camp of the Philistines, Goliath of Gath whose height was six cubits and a sepan.

When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

Then one of the twelve called Judas Iscariot went unto the chief priests . . . to betray him.

The Kid frowned at the words he had written, and even after food was placed before him, his mind was still upon the riddle of those three references.

The letter Whitman had written when he'd sent Hellvation Hank's Bible to Matt McGrath had not been too informative. Hank had threatened to expose three men. Hank had been killed. That was the size of it.

Three men. . . .

At first Matt McGrath had seen no significance in those three blood-stained passages in his brother's Bible. Then he'd begun to read a meaning in them, for those three passages referred to

three Biblical characters. Matt McGrath knew little about the Book but he'd taken to studying it after that, and slowly he had begun to understand why those passages had been marked. And that was when he had packed his warbag and taken the long trail north—in search of three men.

Goliath was one of them, a man of great strength. But Samson had been a strong man, too. Why hadn't Hellvation Hank marked a reference to Samson instead of Goliath? Now the Kid thought he saw the answer. Samson had used his strength for good—Goliath had championed evil. And there was a clue.

Herod? The king of Judea had been a puzzler for the Kid and he had searched long and diligently for the key to the character of that man, dead almost two thousand years. Herod, crafty and cruel and unscrupulous, an evil king, jealous of his sovereignty, a red-handed man who'd had lesser men do his killing for him.

And Judas, the betrayer. There was the simplest of the three to decode.

THERE WAS one other significance, the Kid decided. Obviously the three men did not have Biblical given names. No Pete or Jake or Joe had struck down Hellvation Hank. If such had been the case, the sky pilot would have marked a reference to Peter, Jacob or Joseph.

His hunger satisfied, the Kid came to the street again. If there was a man in Caprock who might know the enemies of the Montana-Pacific who had traits resembling those of Goliath, Herod and Judas, that man was Dan Callishaw whose job was to battle "The Three." He'd ask Callishaw about them.

A thousand sounds beat against him as he skipped nimbly across the muddy street.

Two freighters, their wagons wheel-locked hub against hub, cursed each other roundly, and on a nearby corner a drunken man, his shirt-tail out and flapping, lifted a gun and fired into the sky, punctuating the shots with a declaration that he was a curly wolf and therefore entitled to howl. And on this street where sin strode boldly, that roaring gun attracted no attention.

Truly, the Kid observed to himself, with a wry grin, this town was feeling its oats. The thought kept him company up the gloomy stairway and to Dan Callishaw's door. He tapped on the door.

"It's me, McGrath, Dan!" he called in a loud voice, and stepped into the darkened room.

Dan Callishaw was here but now he was a shapeless sprawling thing, heaped in a corner, and there was no life in him for a bullet had torn off the top of his head. In falling he had somehow crashed against the headboard tilted against the wall and his body pinned it there, half concealing it. All the Kid could read was that last line:

HE WAS WARNED, BUT HE WOULDN'T LISTEN.

IV

MANY businesses had boomed in Caprock with the coming of the steel but Hoyt Durham's Golden Slipper Saloon had reaped the greatest share of the golden harvest. Trade had been many times multiplied by the influx of railroad workers who sought the solace of the bottle, the green baize, or the painted smiles of percentage girls.

A long bar ran the length of the Golden Slipper. There was a spacious floor for dancing while a gambling wing hummed to the click of the roulette wheels, the incessant slap of the pasteboards. Oil paintings adorned the walls. Most of them depicted semi-nudes and one in particular held the place of honor, a huge painting called "The Lady of the Nile" which portrayed a voluptuous, sultry-eyed woman stretched full length upon a leopard skin, a diaphanous bit of cloth flowing about her.

On the second floor were the rooms of the percentage girls, and another room which no more than a dozen men had ever entered. It was Hoyt Durham's private office, luxuriously furnished as befitted the man who ruled the shadowy side of the range.

Three men sat in that room on the morning of Matt McGrath's arrival in Caprock. One was Hoyt Durham, dark-skinned and dandified, thin-faced and with a wisp of mustache and a nervous habit of preening it with one jewel-bedecked hand. Another man was Curly

Bottsinger, the broad-shouldered freight line owner, a huge hulking giant, shaggy and powerful as a rampaging grizzly.

A lamp lighted the room, even in the daytime, for there were no windows, since the office was below the floor level of the second story. The third man sat in the shadows, just beyond the fringe of the yellow light. He was studying the two, and his thought was that Hoyt Durham was the deadlier of the pair in spite of the primitive savagery of Bottsinger.

"I had to wait," Bottsinger was saying. "This other gent was in the room with Callishaw for quite a spell. I tried to listen to what they was jawin' about. As much as I could get was that this jigger had been sent to side Callishaw—another trouble-shooter. I hid in the hall till the new jigger left."

"Yes?" the third man prompted him.

"I knocked and Callishaw let me in. He had that old Peacemaker of his in his fist and he wasn't in no hurry about pouchin' it. 'I just come in from end o' steel," I said to him. "I got news for you, Dan.' He relaxed some then, puttin' his gun away. Then I let him have it and got out in a hurry."

"Positive he was dead?" the third man asked.

"Plumb dead," Bottsinger insisted.

"Anybody notice the shot?"

"Reckon not. Some drunk was blazin' at the sky down on the corner and there was a cap or two bein' cracked out in the alley. What difference did another shot make?"

The third man settled back in his chair contentedly.

"Business is good, eh Hoyt?" he observed. "Gentlemen, you're a pair of scoundrels. You, Hoyt, are bucking the Montana-Pacific and all the while lining your pockets with railroad pay-roll money. And you, Curly—you're getting fat on grading contracts and the money you're paid to haul freight past the end of steel. Biting the hand that feeds you."

"So?" Hoyt Durham said, smiling without humor. "Business was good before the railroad came, especially if a man lifted a little beef in the dark of the moon as a sideline. But what happens when the road is finished? The boom is over and law and order comes to the Caprock country."

"Me, I hate every cussed tie they lay!" Bottsinger exploded savagely. "Look at the cinch thing I had! If a man wanted something hauled on or off this range, he paid my price and liked it. And if some jigger got the notion of starting a rival freight line, things happened to that gent. But now trains are running as far as Caprock already. I'll be bankrupt once this road goes through. I shore wish Tyler Whitman had been dumped into Crowfoot Gulch last night with that load of steel on top of him! It was only fool luck that saved him after me and the boys blasted that trestle."

THE THIRD man still smiled, the satisfied smile of a man whose allies are his pawns. Bottsinger folded one hairy fist and regarded it truculently. Durham stirred restlessly.

"What next?" the saloon owner asked. "Think we ought to send that new trouble-shooter a headboard?"

"That headboard idea's no good!" Bottsinger scoffed. "It didn't make Callishaw run."

"The headboard idea," the third man exploded patiently, "has a psychological value, Curly. You wouldn't understand that. Its value is twice as great because Callishaw wouldn't be warned and had to die. The next man to get one of those wooden warnings is going to know it means what it implies."

"We should send one to that new trouble-shooter," Durham insisted. "We want to get rid of him pronto."

"Not yet," the third man decided. "The fellow will probably walk softly once he learns what happened to Callishaw, anyway. Our job right now is at end o' steel. Curly, you'd better get out there again. With winter really over Whitman's order will be to drive, and drive hard. Keep the men stirred up enough so they'll do about half their work. Tell 'em M.P. is going broke and they'll never be paid. Tell 'em Central Western is paying better money. Tell 'em anything. Every delay means the Montana-Pacific is that much nearer to being licked."

"And C.W. is that much nearer to crossing the Big Thunders first," Durham added. "That will please you, eh?

And us too. Montana's big enough to have a railroad without it running through the Caprock country to spoil our business."

Curly Bottsinger came to his feet and moved in his ponderous fashion to the wall that separated this office from the barroom. A leather flap, about four inches square, hung on the wall about three feet above the floor. Crouching, Bottsinger lifted it to peer through two eye-holes bored in the wall. He was looking down into the barroom through the eyes of "The Lady of the Nile." The picture was a trick affair and an ingenious one. The eyes of the painting were not on the canvas but on the leather flap. When the flap hung in place, which it usually did, the picture looked complete to the keenest observer. When the flap was lifted, human eyes took the place of the painted ones.

Curly Bottsinger scanned the big room through the device. Gazing long and intently, he stiffened with excitement and straightened himself, his broad face twisted.

"It's him!" he said huskily. "He just walked in!"

"Who?" the third man demanded quickly.

"The new trouble-shooter. The one who was confabbin' with Dan Callishaw this morning. But that ain't all! I had a pretty fair look at that jigger this morning. But just for a minute as he stood inside the batwings there was something about his face that—that . . . Hell, I would have swore he was Hellvation Hank McGrath!"

"Hellvation Hank," Hoyt Durham said emphatically, "is dead and buried!"

The anonymous man crossed the room in two strides and crouched to have a look for himself.

"He does look like McGrath," he agreed.

Curly Bottsinger was dragging a gun from its holster. "Hoyt, I'm going to plumb ruin your pretty pitcher," he snarled. "Maybe that jigger saw me around the Drovers Rest this morning. He's here lookin' for me! I'm going to drive a bullet right between the eyes of 'The Lady of the Nile' and likewise right between the eyes of that new trouble-shooter!"

"Wait, you fool!" snapped the third man. His fingers closed on Bottsinger's wrist. "There's half-a-hundred railroad workers down there. If a man is gunned right before their eyes they'll come stampeding up here and tear the place apart. I know the breed! Even if we got out it wouldn't take Tyler Whitman ten minutes to add up things, either. He'd know The Three he talks about are using the Golden Slipper for headquarters."

"But we can't let that jigger go snoopin' around here," Bottsinger argued.

The eyes of the third man were dark with thought. At last he smiled.

"I have it!" he said. "I'd thought we'd let this new fellow alone for a while unless opportunity laid him in our laps. Perhaps it has—if we work it right. I've got a plan that will do the trick. Listen, gentlemen—"

V

FOR a long time the Gospel Kid had stood in the musty room in the Drovers Rest, looking down at the body of Dan Callishaw. Then, knowing life was forever gone from the man, he went downstairs and told the clerk who promptly sped along the street to the undertaker's. The Kid headed for the railroad office to send a telegram.

"Can you get this through to Tyler Whitman?" he asked "Key" O'Dade, handing him his scribbled message.

O'Dade read it, a growing anger making his red face redder.

"Dan Callishaw—dead!" he gasped. "So it's killin' good men they've taken to doin'! Bad cess to the three of them. Bad cess!"

"O'Dade," said the Kid, "if you wanted to find the gun that shot Dan Callishaw, where would you start lookin'?"

Key O'Dade gave him a quick glance, running his stubby finger through his red hair.

"Faith and it's a riddle yez are askin' me, boy. But it's the Golden Slipper where ye'll find gunmen hanging out and it's Hoyt Durham that's hirin' thim these days. Just this mornin' two new ones was askin' the way to that divil's own dancehall."

"The Golden Slipper, eh?" said the Kid and turned on his heel.

Looking for the killer of Dan Callishaw in this teeming town would be like looking for a needle in a haystack—or worse, since he had no idea who'd triggered the gun. But there was always the chance that luck might favor a man, some odd clue might come his way. That possibility took the Kid through the batwings and into the glittering interior of the Golden Slipper.

Fifty-odd M.P. workers awaited the hour when the work train would pull out for end o' steel. Most of them were in this saloon, crowding the bar or milling in the gambling wing. There were others here as well, gamblers and gunmen, and the Kid, standing in the doorway, had the sensation of eyes upon him. Something prickled along his spine, some vague warning. Yet his darting glance saw no hostility. He moved to the bar, ordered whisky.

A great mirror, freighted in a decade before, ran the length of the wall behind the bar and in the polished glass he studied the place and the people who filled it. The paintings on the wall claimed his attention, too, for he could see their reflections.

But it was the one called "The Lady of the Nile" that really claimed his eyes. Just for an instant that picture had come to life! It was unbelievable, but in was so! For a second there had been a subtle change in the lifeless canvas, a change the Kid was unable to define. His eyes glued to the picture, he watched it intently, hoping the change would come again. He was still watching when a voice spoke at his elbow.

"Pretty, ain't she?"

The man who had edged up to the bar beside him was a seedy specimen, gaunt, cadaverous, with bleary eyes in a face that hadn't felt a razor in at least three days. Thin yellow hair, ragged and unkempt, fell to the collar of the corduroy coat the man wore. The suit had obviously been slept in. The brand of a barfly was so plainly stamped on the fellow that the Kid anticipated his next remark.

"I'm down on my luck," the man whined. "Could you buy a feller a drink?"

The Kid eyed him reflectively. "Been around here long?" he asked.

"Months now. Ever since last fall."

The Kid signaled a bartender and ordered a bottle and a second glass. Wincing at the boomtown price he was forced to pay, he wondered if the investment would bring any worthwhile returns. His guest slopped liquor into the glass, downed it in a gulp. The Kid sipped his.

"Who," he asked, faint irony in his voice, "do I have the pleasure of drinking with?"

"Loomis. Shadow Loomis they call me. What difference does a name make?"

The Kid had no answer for that one. But he automatically responded to the demands of courtesy.

"McGrath is my name," he volunteered.

"I know," said Loomis. "He was killed." "Shadow" Loomis poured himself another drink without waiting for an invitation. "He shouldn't have opened the door without a gun," he said morosely. "He shouldn't have taken that chance."

THE KID felt a swift surge of excitement, but his voice betrayed none of it.

"What do you know about that?" he asked easily. "How do you know he opened the door without a gun?"

Shadow Loomis shrugged. "How does anybody know? He was found dead in front of his own shack and there was no gun on him . . . A pretty picture there on the wall, eh? 'The Lady of the Nile' they call her. She can see, friend, and she can hear. And some day she'll speak. Just remember that Shadow Loomis told you."

The Kid looked at Loomis in disgust as the barfly poured another drink. The man was crazy, the Kid decided, or at least so addle-witted from too much alcohol as to be hardly worth bothering with, for his mouthings were certainly meaningless. But as the Kid shifted his gaze to the mirror, studying the man in its polished depths, his own eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"You kin to Hellvation Hank?" Loomis asked, dragging a sleeve across his mouth.

Before the Kid could answer, that presentiment of danger ran through him again. But the warning bell tolled too

late, for suddenly danger was an actuality rather than a shadowy foreboding. It happened fast.

A man had crowded to the bar beside the Kid, a tall, angular man, beard-stubbled and loose-lipped.

"Give a feller elbow room, can't you!" the man growled, and shouldered the Kid away so violently as to send him staggering backward to crash against another man.

This other fellow, barrel-like in build, cursed him viciously. "Watch where yuh're goin'!" he snarled and shoved the Kid, hurling him back against the first man.

The play was so well timed, so patently a planned job of trouble-making that it shrieked a warning to the Kid. The anger that blazed in the eyes of both these men was completely out of proportion to what prompted it, while the tied-down holsters of the two proclaimed their calling—and their intent. Others saw the play and read its portent. Suddenly men were falling over each other in a mad scramble to get out of the possible line of fire.

Shadow Loomis had slid away as silently as though he were made of the substance of his sobriquet. The Kid stood alone with the two men, one on either side of him. He was at an angle where they would catch him in a raking crossfire once they went for their guns. And that was what they were going to do, just as soon as they found a halfway plausible excuse.

"Get at it!" the Kid said with a vast disgust.

They needed no further invitation. The Kid, facing the taller of the two, didn't need to see the man's downward darting hand, for the gesture registered in the fellow's yellowish eyes. Instantly the Kid was twisting aside, jerking his own gun in the same motion. The walls sent back hammering echoes as two guns roared. The Kid fell sideward to the floor. The tall gunman fell too, drilled through the heart.

But only one dead man sprawled upon the floor. The gunman's bullet had breathed hotly past the Kid's ear, missing him. He had purposely fallen to save himself from the other gunman and the ruse had worked, for a bullet had droned over his head as he fell. Hitting the floor, the Kid rolled, the next shot from the squat gunman geysering dust into his eyes. But firing from the floor, the Kid saw the man take three hesitant steps, then trip over his partner to fall dead on top of him.

The Kid came to his feet, gun still in his hand, his eyes flickering from one face to another, measuring the men who crowded against the far wall.

"Which one of you is Hoyt Durham?" he demanded in the hush that held the crowd.

From the shelter of a post supporting the ceiling, Hoyt Durham stepped, his swarthy face as expressionless as the top of a table.

"I'm Durham, stranger," he said. "Some mighty nice shooting you did. What can I do for you?"

"These your men?"

Durham stroked his mustache, his gaze sliding over the two dead gunmen.

"They came here this morning asking for a job," he said. "A man in my position has to have others to guard his back sometimes, but I have no use for men of their stripe. I turned them down. That's what put them on the prod, probably."

Stooping, the Kid turned one of the dead gunmen's pockets inside out. A handful of gold coins tinkled to the floor. The Kid scattered them with the toe of his boot as he straightened.

"Probably!" he said mockingly.

HIS GAZE locked with Hoyt Durham's and in that instant a name drummed through the Kid's head persistently. *Herod!* A red-handed king who had lesser men do his killing for him. But because there wasn't a shred of proof to back his suspicions, he pouched his gun and strode out without another word.

As he shouldered along the crowded walk, a reckless anger was burning within him. He found himself abreast of a building whose big bay window bore the lettering:

CAPROCK TRIBUNE
Thackery Weaver, Editor

He turned inside. Enthroned behind a huge pigeon-holed desk in a littered room, redolent of ink and glue, sat a

plump, pink-cheeked, gray-headed man who blinked owlishly through a pair of thick glasses.

"You Weaver?" the Kid asked.

"That's me," the man admitted. "Can I help you?"

"You can answer a question," said the Kid. "You gave Dan Callishaw a write-up in your paper, a write-up that mentioned everything about him, includin' the date of his birth. Do you always make it a point to find out a man's birthday?"

Thackery Weaver beamed pridefully. "The Caprock *Tribune* boasts of its thoroughness," he said. "We find it pays to be alert. In our files we have complete lists of data on anybody of importance. Should a piece of news break, we can instantly embellish it with all the necessary details."

"I savvy," the Kid said. "You could practically write an obituary ahead of time. You've got a finger on everybody in town, eh?"

"Anybody who is prominent. I can supply the date of birth, the place, the past history of all our leading citizens including newcomers like Tyler Whitman and Kurt Ormond, his chief engineer."

"I'd like a look at those lists," the Kid interjected.

Thackery Weaver came out of his chair. He was short and pudgy, and if he hoped to look belligerent he only looked ludicrous.

"Just who are you, mister?" he demanded in a less cordial tone.

"Trouble-shooter for the M.P.," the Kid said. "Trot out those lists. I crave to see just who's included."

WEAVER hesitated, shrugged, and moved over to an old-fashioned filing cabinet that stood against one ink-smudged wall. Dragging out a drawer, he fumbled in its depths for several minutes. When he turned, his pink jowls sagged with amazement.

"They're gone!" he cried. "My lists are gone—stolen! What do you know about this, mister? What made you so interested in them?"

"Never mind," said the Kid.

He was studying the little newspaper man, trying to read Thackery Weaver's character and to fit it into one of three patterns. But Weaver was hard to read. Those glasses made him so for they distorted his appearance.

"What do you think about the railroad?" the Kid asked casually. "Any reason why it shouldn't run through this section?"

"The railroad?" Weaver repeated, and instantly struck a pose. "The railroad is the dream of every far-sighted citizen of Caprock and our paper was the first to point out the benefits to come from such an undertaking. Why, in an early editorial of mine—"

"That's enough," the Kid said brusquely, then softened his tone. "I'm thankin' you for your trouble. And here's a tip for you. There's news for your paper at the Drovers Rest and the Golden Slipper today. Better go after it."

Weaver reached quickly for paper and pencil.

"News!" he cried excitedly. "But you're news too. I'd like to give you a write-up. Now if you'll just give me some data—"

"No, thanks," the Kid said drily, and left.

At the railroad office he found a characteristically brief telegram for him from Whitman. It read:

SORRY ABOUT CALLISHAW, YOU'RE PROMOTED. REPORT TO ORMOND.

The work train was chugging out of Caprock and the Kid made it on the run. He found a seat in a car overcrowded with graders and steel-layers and, hunkered there, he recalled something he had completely forgotten in the excitement of the gun-duel. Shadow Loomis . . . That man might be a piece to the puzzle too. Apparently Loomis was a dissolute barfly, yet he didn't play the part to perfection. Watching him in the mirror, the Kid had seen Loomis step out of character, but hadn't had a chance to do anything about the discovery.

Shadow Loomis had begged for liquor and downed his first drink. The Kid wasn't so sure about the others. But one thing was certain—Shadow Loomis had poured his last drink into the cuspidor at his feet.

VI

END o' steel!

The Gospel Kid reached it in the late afternoon and with his neck craned from a window of the work train he had his first glimpse of the scene. Beyond Caprock the jerky march of the rails to the mountains had been halted by the icy hand of a Montana winter. But now the Montana-Pacific was stirring to activity like a hibernating bear freshly released from its season of bondage.

Weather-beaten tents and construction shacks mottled the prairie. Supplies were scattered everywhere. The bridge crews were a score of miles ahead and beyond them a tunnel crew was already drilling a hole through the first barrier of the Big Thunders. But most of the workers were here, a teeming army of them.

Standing on a siding was a special car with a lonely sort of dignity—the office of the engineering staff. The Kid crossed to it. In the car he found Kurt Ormond busy at a desk piled high with reports and papers.

Waiting for Ormond to be free, the Kid studied the man who was second in command to Tyler Whitman. He was surprised to see that Ormond was apparently little older than thirty; a still-faced, sharp-featured man, browned by exposure. The Kid wasn't sure whether he liked Ormond or not. The chief engineer had a machinelike quality that made him as impersonal as a donkey-engine. When Ormond spoke, that was emphasized in his metallic voice.

"Well?"

"Whitman told me to report to you," the Kid explained. "I'm McGrath, the new trouble-shooter. Dan Callishaw is dead."

"I know," Ormond said. "I just got a wire from O'Dade. If Whitman hired you, that settles it. But I'm not so sure it was a good idea."

"You don't like my looks, eh?"

"I've nothing personal against you," Ormond said. "I just happen to know a lot about you. Ty knows those same things and hired you, anyway. Your brother, Hellvation Hank, was a man in anybody's language, but you're a different kind of gent. You were mixed up in a few shady deals down in Texas, McGrath, and we know it. Your back-trail makes no difference to me, so long as you play square with the Montana-Pacific. But I'm wondering. When the road is fighting for its life, I'm not so sure I want a man around whose history has as many missing pages as yours. Do we understand each other?"

"I reckon," the Kid said, without rancor. "Anything else?"

"You're here to avenge your brother," Ormond went on. "I can read that in your eyes. It would please M.P. mightily if you caught up with The Three, but the railroad comes first, if you're working for us. Maybe you'll be off riding your own trail just when we most need you."

"Me, I've got two jobs to do," said the Kid. "One of them is to see M.P. steel cross the Big Thunders. That would be for Hank—but maybe you wouldn't understand that. If I have to do my other chore first, I'll quit the railroad. Right now I crave to go to work. Callishaw said something about an agitator being here. Maybe I should have a look-see around."

Ormond nodded. "Somebody's stirring up the crews," he admitted. "I haven't had the time to try and smoke him out. Some of the work is let out on contract, which means a lot of strange faces around camp. Go have a look—but be careful."

The Kid paused at the door. "Met a queer gent in Caprock today," he said. "Shadow Loomis he calls himself. Know him?"

Ormond's interest quickened. "Yes," he said. "Looks like a barfly but I've wondered about him. If you get a chance, McGrath, have a long talk with him and see just what you can find out."

The Kid stepped from the car. Kurt Ormond had been blunt, outspoken, but the Kid carried no grudge on that score. They each had a job to do. Part of Ormond's job had been to weigh Matt McGrath for any weakness he might find. That was as it should be.

Blending with the toiling crews, the Kid made an unobstrusive tour of inspection, seeing men who worked hard and men who worked lazily and studying all of them in silence. There was a certain advantage in the fact that he was

new here. His presence didn't spur the lazy to a pretense of industry. The Kid wasn't concerned with lazy men—it was something sinister he sought. And within an hour he found it.

FAR OUT on the grade, when a score of men leveled the roadbed, their pace determined the pace of those who came behind them—the track layers and those husky men who swung the sledges to inch the rails toward the west. Here was the key to the trouble that slowed down work. The Kid saw them loitering, saw them put their heads together for whispered consultations time and again while those behind had to wait.

The straw-boss of this sluggish crew was a broad-shouldered giant who had been on the work train out. The Kid sized up the man purposefully and finally tapped his shoulder.

"I'd like to talk to you," he said.

The giant turned and for an instant he stood slack-jawed, his eyes widening. Then his lip curled as he surveyed the Kid from head to foot.

"Texas man, eh?" he said. "I saw you in the Golden Slipper today. You're mighty handy with your gun but I never knew a Tejano yet that was worth two cents without his hardware. I got nothing to talk to you about. Get out o' here, mister, before you get trampled on!"

Kurt Ormond was striding toward them and the Kid waited for the chief engineer's arrival.

"Stick around, Ormond," he said. "I've found the gent we was talking about, I'm thinkin'."

"You're crazy!" Ormond snapped while the Kid slipped off his gun-belt. "It's Curly Bottsinger you're bucking. He's the toughest rough-and-tumble man in the Caprocks. Do you want to get killed?"

"Shucks," said the Kid. "The Caprocks ain't so big. You gents ever seen the Panhandle?"

He hit Bottsinger then. His left fist arched to smash bunched knuckles into the giant's face, a terrific blow. It was the quickest way to get things started, the Kid had decided, for he knew he had found the man who was delaying the steel. That man was the kind who could understand no argument but action.

But the blow scarcely shook Bottsinger. He came forward with a wild rush and the Kid was cold with the realization that it had been a great deal easier to start this fight than it was going to be to finish it.

Bottsinger's fists lashed out as the Kid bobbed beneath them. For a single second the giant was off balance and in that golden moment the Kid's right whammed against Bottsinger's chin. The giant only laughed, his own fist swinging. The Kid saw it coming—saw it too late. He tried to twist aside but Bottsinger's knuckles grazed his shoulder, sending the Kid somersaulting backwards onto the ground.

With a roar of triumph Bottsinger came after him and the giant's intent was obvious. It was going to be a rough-and-tumble fight now, the kind of fight where the immense bulk of Bottsinger would be an overwhelming advantage. But as the giant launched himself upon the fallen Texan, the Kid rolled to his back and his legs jack-knifed, his boots crashing against Bottsinger's broad chest, hurling the man away. Before Bottsinger could recover himself to rush again, the Kid was on his feet and carrying the fight to him, his arms pistoning.

They crashed together, slugging toe to toe until the Kid turned himself into a dancing, darting figure, hard to find and harder to hit. All the while his own fists were taking toll of the giant and cheers went up, for an unofficial recess had suddenly been declared and every worker ringed the fighters, yelling, excited, shouting advice that was only a dull roar in the ears of the Kid.

It was a battle that was to go down in the annals of the Montana-Pacific and at first the Kid was sick with the thought that its end was inevitable. He had tackled Bottsinger because it was part of his job, but there was another reason as well. Kurt Ormond had been dubious about the Kid—and not entirely without justification. Here was the chance to prove himself. Then he'd wondered if he had bitten off a great deal more than he was going to be able to chew.

But he was still on his feet, still slugging, and it came to him that he had worn the fine edge from the fighting

strength of Curly Bottsinger. The man was still before him, a red, blurry shadow that refused to go down. But Bottsinger's blows had less dynamite behind them. The Kid threw himself into the fray with a fresh fervor, born of a faint glimmer of hope.

He ripped rights and lefts at Bottsinger's body and face, taking punishment while dodging the giant's mallet-like fists with an automatic efficiency. Once when they went down together, Bottsinger's thumb fumbled for the Kid's eye. But the Kid managed to heave him aside, come erect again, and the giant came after him.

Then it was an endless repetition of what had become a nightmare—slug and dodge, hit and ride with a blow, drive and drive and drive until that bloody bulk was before him no more.

HE WAS like a man in a troubled dream whose motions are sluggish when speed is needed, whose strength is water when it had to be steel. He feinted awkwardly, his gesture threatening Bottsinger's midriff. The giant dropped his huge fists for protection and his jaw was exposed. The Kid had hit that jaw a dozen times but he hit it again, hit it with everything that was left. Bottsinger fell, sprawling loosely on the ground.

But he would be up again. He would be back with those merciless fists flailing, and the Kid would go down. He knew that. He could gauge his own powers and knew he had gone to their limit. But something was decidedly wrong, for Bottsinger wasn't getting up. Bottsinger was staying on the ground. Spitting out a tooth, Bottsinger forced a single word through his broken lips:

"Enough."

Bottsinger was beaten! And horny hands were seizing the Kid and a hundred men were surrounding him, pounding his back, trying to shake his hand. But there was strength enough in him to speak and he did, his voice sounding nothing like his own.

"Gents," he said, "I'm no great shakes with a shovel but I'd like to see this road finished. I reckon you'll have to do the rest of it. Back to it, you terriers!"

They were a fighting breed, and they could understand a fighting man. They returned to the grade enthusiastically and only the Kid, weak and dizzy, stood there with Kurt Ormond while Bottsinger painfully propped himself upon one elbow.

"You're a McGrath all right, curse you!" the giant snarled. "Hellvation Hank was the only man your size who ever packed your kind of wallop!"

"Get out when you're able!" the Kid said wearily. "Get out—and stay out!"

There was admiration in Ormond's eyes.

"You just manhandled the giant of the Caprock country!" the engineer said.

"A giant?" the Kid repeated, and shook his head. " 'And there went out a champion out of the camp of the Philistines,' " he muttered, " 'named Goliath of Gath. . . .' "

"What's that?" Ormond asked.

The Kid made no answer for it was no more than a hunch he had. But there was balm for his bruised body in the thought that perhaps he had just met up with another of The Three, and beaten the man.

VII

ON HIS first day in the service of the Montana-Pacific, the Kid had had his baptism of fire and of fist, conquered a champion, and won the respect of the brawny breed who pushed steel toward the sunset. If the days that followed were not so hectic, they were busy, with the Kid policing the grading crews and stamping out the last of the dissension among them. There was excitement too, and danger, for another trestle was blasted skyward and there were nights when the Kid never saw the cot in the tent that had been assigned to him. But his was the satisfaction of having done his part when the end of steel reached Lazura in record time.

A mile a day, sometimes more as April turned into May, the track had crawled, and the first of June saw the railroad's arrival at Lazura. And Lazura took on a new lease of life for the bubble had burst at Caprock and the wise ones hurried to this new font of fortune. Even the Golden Slipper made

the move. True, this was a new Golden Slipper, a flimsy building of wood and canvas designed for transportation from town to town. But the same bar and tables were here, freighted overland by Curly Bottsinger. And "The Lady of the Nile" smiled down from a fragile wall upon the thirsty of Lazura-town.

Thackery Weaver was here, too, his press pounding in a big tent. The Kid met the editor on the street and had to listen to Weaver's enthusiastic babbling.

"It's not the Caprock *Tribune* any more. It's the paper that follows the rails, the *End O'Steel Echo*. When the road is finished, I'll go back to Caprock." He fixed his weird stare upon the Kid, his voice peevish as another thought struck him. "Why didn't you tell me you were Hellvation Hank's brother? Everybody knows it now and everybody knows you're here to avenge Hank. I could have given you a mighty nice write-up. . . . ."

The Kid shouldered on. A score of business places were hanging out shingles, all proving that Caprock was following the steel. In a dark alley that first night, the Kid caught a glimpse of a phantomlike figure scurrying along and was sure it was Shadow Loomis. He chased the man, calling his name, but Loomis merged with the gloom and was gone. Yet the Kid was certain he'd seen Shadow Loomis, and the puzzle remained.

A great restlessness was beginning to stir within Matt McGrath. The novelty of the grading camps had worn off, and the marching days had brought him no nearer to his goal. Of course he was seeing the triumph of the Montana-Pacific for word came that the Central Western's progress was not alarming. That pleased the Kid, since the railroad was Hellvation Hank's unrealized dream. But he was no nearer to The Three and he longed for a change in routine. So it was that Tyler Whitman found him more than responsive when he gave the Kid a special order.

"You'll find the Deadman country yonder," Whitman told him, a wave of his arm indicating the Big Thunders looming above them, miles away yet seemingly at the end of the steel. "There's a beef herd being gathered on that range for delivery to the camps. I'd rest easier if you'd meet the herd and make sure it got here."

"Rustlers?" the Kid asked hopefully.

"Maybe. Or perhaps the herd never was gathered."

"Don't the Deadman ranchers like the feel of railroad money?"

Whitman frowned. "You might as well know the truth of it," he said. "Storm Herndon of the H-in-a-Hat is king of the Deadman range and a crusty old codger he is. He hates the railroad and makes no bones about it, figures it will fill the country with sod-busters. Yet, Herndon is a friend of mine. We rode range together, along with Hellvation Hank, before we had fuzz on our faces. But if Herndon's got it into his head to buck the road, he'll fight hard. If he decides to starve us out, the other Deadman ranchers will probably follow his lead. See what you might be up against?"

"Herndon?" said the Kid. "There was a girl on the train into Caprock, name of Lana Herndon."

"His daughter," Whitman explained. "Storm sent her East for schooling. She didn't like it, and she's just as stubborn as he is."

THE Kid asked no more questions, but another hour found him in the saddle and out on the plain. Pushing hard that long day, he passed Deadman-town, sleepy and silent, awaiting the magic wand of the Montana-Pacific to awake it from its drowsiness, and he ate with the M.P. tunnel crew upon the slope of the Big Thunders that night. Dawn found him angling northward, skirting that frowning range.

It was wild, rugged country with upthrusting ground forming a palisade of cliffs with a stream gurgling at their base. These cliffs were an effective barrier forcing the M.P. to swing to the south. The engineering staff had decided to detour before drilling a tunnel. But such matters held little interest for the Kid. Circling back on the prairie again, he scanned the horizon and in the late afternoon saw the dust raised by a thousand hoofs as a moving queue of cattle moved stolidly across the range.

A half-dozen riders hazed the beefs

along. There was no chuckwagon with the outfit but an open-topped wagon, piled high with supplies, led the cavalcade in the point position, a small figure holding the reins. Touching spurs to his horse, the Kid thundered toward the wagon, whirling his mount to rein short abreast of it.

"Railroad beef?" he asked, and found himself staring into the blue eyes of Lana Herndon.

She was in levis and jumper with her hair tucked under a floppy sombrero. The Kid stared, tongue-tied. This girl had crowded his thoughts many times since their brief meeting beyond Crowfoot Gulch but mostly he had remembered the coldness of her last glance and had puzzled over it. That same coldness was in her manner now.

"Yes," she said stiffly.

The Kid paced his mount beside her wagon. "Didn't think I'd find *you* here," he remarked.

"This herd belongs to a half-dozen Deadman spreads. Each outfit has a rep riding with it. I'm here for my dad's H-in-a-Hat."

The Kid grinned. "Storm Herndon's willin' to feed the railroad, eh?"

Her chin came up. "He made a bargain with Ty Whitman last fall," she said. "He's keeping that bargain. After that, he'll decide whether we sell more beef to the M.P. What do we want with a railroad on this range?"

"It'll get cattle to market without walkin' the tallow off 'em," the Kid observed. "It'll mean prosperity for the towns along the right-o'-way."

"Like Caprock?" she mocked. "Is that your idea of what a town should be like? Drunken men and painted women?"

He shrugged. "I saw a sawbones operate on a man once," he said. "It wasn't pretty, but afterwards the gent was in better shape than he'd ever been."

She had no answer for that. Suddenly spurred by an impulse, he swung from the saddle to the wagon seat, taking the reins from her hands before she could protest. "Miss Herndon," he said, "I wouldn't mind knowin' what there is about me that makes me look like a sidewinder to you."

"You don't know why?"

He shook his head.

She was silent for a thoughtful moment.

"Hellvation Hank was my friend," she said at last. "He always stopped at the H when he was in the Deadman country. He was a wonderful man. All he ever owned was the clothes he wore and the leather-bound Bible he carried, yet he was a lot happier than many men who measured themselves and each other by the acres they owned and the cattle they tallied. Can you understand that?"

"Hank," said the Kid, "Was almost old enough to be my father. So I didn't know him well. He wrote me right often but I never saw him after I was a button."

"And you never worried about him, either," she snapped. "Yet Hellvation loved only two things—his work, and his kid brother. Oh, he told me all about you!"

"Musta' of been pretty," the Kid observed drily.

"It was as pretty as Hank could make it," she retorted. "But he was too honest to deny the truth. Young Matt was down on the Border. Matt was running wet cattle across the Rio. Matt was mixed up in some shirt-tail revolution and was smuggling guns into Mexico. Matt's name was linked with a bank robbery in the Panhandle. It seemed like Matt was in trouble most of the time."

SHE turned toward him.

"Can't you understand what you did to Hank?" "What it meant to him to have the brother he loved the kind of man who was everything Hank preached against and hated? Do you see that couldn't be any real happines for Hank when he knew what you were? That's the cross Hellvation Hank carried. And you're the man who loaded it upon his shoulders!"

"But I'm here on account of him," he reminded her.

"Yes!" she blazed. "To shoot and to kill! That would be your way, Matt McGrath! I knew it when you spoke your piece to Tyler Whitman."

"Maybe Hellvation Hank wouldn't mind," he said, remembering things he'd read in his brother's Bible. "Didn't the Israelites have to get a mite rough with

the Philistines before they won the Promised Land?"

The silence that fell between them was broken only by the bawling of the herd, the creak of the wagon.

"When a feller is young and headstrong he forgets a lot of things," the Kid finally remarked. "He forgets the mother who kept a lamp in the window for him, and the father who was stern because his own blood had been hot blood once. And he forgets the brother whose ways weren't his ways. But it's a long trail from Texas, and a man can do a heap of thinking on it."

He paused, his voice thick with suffering. "Then I began to savvy why patched britches and a four-dollar hoss was good enough for Hank," he said. "I'd have liked to told Hank about that when I got to Caprock. But you can't talk to a tombstone."

He turned at the pressure of her hand upon his arm and he was amazed to see tears jeweling her eyes.

"I—I'm sorry, Matt," she said. "I guess I forgot something, too—something about 'Judge not, lest ye be judged.' "

The Gospel Kid smiled for it was as though a fence had been torn down between them. After that their talk turned to trivial things as the afternoon waned and dusk stole across the range.

Thunderheads were massing about the distant peaks and heat lightning played above the horizon when they made camp. Now the Kid had his first chance to meet the trail crew, five salty riders from as many different spreads. But the Kid did no more than acknowledge the introduction, for his interest was centered in the signs of a coming storm and his concern was for the bedded herd.

"I'll take the first watch," he volunteered.

VIII

THE Gospel Kid, in saddle again, rode toward the bedded herd, a darker bulk against the crowding darkness. Circling, he sang softly to them, humming his favorite toneless tune. A few drops of rain spattered against him and the sky growled a deep-voiced threat.

Yet the Kid knew a measure of contentment at this moment. Born to the saddle, he was doing his own kind of work once again. And he was remembering the half-forgotten dream of every wandering cowboy, the dream of a spread of his own and a herd to bear his brand.

But the Kid was also uneasy. For the feeling was strong upon him that the darkness cloaked forces which were no less potent because they weren't visible. There was something nameless out there in the night, something he felt but couldn't define. The cattle showed signs of restlessness, too, snorting irritably while horns rattled.

Minutes lengthened into an hour and deep darkness swathed the land as the Kid rode circle. A winking eye of fire had marked the distant camp where the weary riders slumbered, but now the fire had died away. The Kid's uneasiness became a clamoring presentiment of danger.

And then, as if in answer to his mood, rifles banged in the distance, barking from where the camp lay. Then suddenly the night was alive with riders, men who materialized out of the gloom with thundering guns. The raiders of the night swept down upon the far side of the herd, shouting and blazing away as they came.

Scared snorts became wild bellows as the cattle exploded into action. Instantly the herd was surging across the range in a mad stampede. And it the midst of it, a chip tossed by that torrent of fear-crazed beef, the Kid was swept along.

Ride the stampede! That was all the Kid could do. His long body flattened out over his mount's neck, he was carried forward by the fury of the herd's wild rush. It was dangerous enough to be swept along by the maddened beef but it would be certain death to try and check the crazed creatures.

Yet in the midst of peril the Kid's real fear was not for himself but for Lana Herndon. Guns in the distance meant the raiders were keeping the camp busy.

Who were those horsemen—hired guns of The Three, of Central Western, rustlers who had sighted prime beefs, theirs for the taking? Whoever they

were, they had struck, and struck hard.

Thinking of Lana's peril goaded the Kid into making a desperate play. Reining carefully, he forced his horse toward the fringe of the herd. It was slow, nerve-racking work for a single misstep might send horse and rider down beneath those thundering hoofs. Ahead was a bit of higher ground, and the Kid inched toward it. If he could gain that slight promontory, the herd might split and go around him. But the bluff seemed a million miles away and steers were still bolting past him as he angled toward it. Thirty feet . . . . twenty . . . . ten . . . . In a few seconds he would be forcing his horse up the bluff, climbing to safety.

But that was when disaster overtook him. He never knew how it happened. Maybe a gopher hole tripped his mount, maybe the horse lost its footing trying to dodge the raking horn of a fear-crazed steer. Whatever the cause, the horse suddenly stumbled and the Kid sailed over its head. He tried frantically to twist himself, to land on all fours. But the ground was rushing upward, a blinding light exploded before his eyes, and a greater darkness engulfed him. . . .

The lash of rain against his face brought the Kid back to consciousness and he found himself sprawled on sloping ground. He had reached the bluff after all. He lay there trying to coordinate his thoughts.

Lana! The herd! With the rush of memory he sat up, to find himself alone. Only the sibilant sound of the rain broke the silence and a flash of lightning revealed an endless vista of prairie, with no living thing in sight except his horse which stood nearby, reins trailing.

Apparently the mount hadn't been crippled by the fall. Painfully the Kid pulled himself into saddle and rode toward the distant camp site. The wagon still stood there, and a cowboy sprawled, his sightless eyes staring into the sloppy heavens, a bullethole in his head. It wasn't the rain that chilled the Kid then. Lana was gone and so were the other four cowboys who had been hazing the herd.

Prisoners? It didn't make sense that the raiders would take prisoners. But the Deadman riders were gone, so the Kid headed in the direction the herd had been stampeded, hoping that somewhere he might find the missing.

TRAILING wasn't easy for the rain had increased in its fury. But the sign was plain in the sodden ground although it would be washed away by morning if this storm continued. By cupping matches the Kid managed to assure himself that he was on the right trail. He had no way of knowing how long he had been unconscious, but he soon realized it couldn't have been long. The trail was fresh enough to prove that.

But most of the night was gone before a lightning flash gave him a glimpse of the herd far ahead. He was overtaking it! Riders were hazing the spent cattle along as he could see in the light that lasted for only a second before deeper darkness descended. The Kid's impulse was to put spurs to his horse, but he realized that caution might be his most potent weapon now.

He was beginning to recognize this country. He was nearing those palisading cliffs he had skirted the day before. They reared straight ahead, which meant the herd would have to angle either to the north or to the south.

The shallow stream which ran along the bottom of the cliffs had been whipped to a fury by the rain when the Kid stood on its bank a half-hour later. Risking a match, he saw sign plain enough. The herd had been forced into the stream and the Kid, schooled along shadowy trails, smiled at the ancient ruse. The raiders were taking no chances. Let a wrathful posse of Deadman ranchers come riding in search of their vanished herd. Let them find sign. It would dead-end on the banks of this stream. Somewhere to the north or south the cattle would come to solid footing again.

Now the Kid could trail only by guesswork and there were two directions to take. He might have chosen one of them had not a sound reached him, one so faint as to be almost lost in the storm, yet recognizable. A shot! And he could have sworn it came from directly across the stream!

His eyes strained, the Kid waited impatiently for the next lightning flash. It

was slow in coming for the rain was beginning to abate. But the lightning came again, giving him a glimpse of the narrow strip of shore on the farther side. There was no place to hide a herd of cattle on that skimpy shelf, clogged with willows and bushes, with the cliffs rearing behind them. Yet the Kid forced his reluctant horse into the stream and, finding the water no more than belly-deep to the animal, he prodded the cayuse to the other shore.

And there, thrashing about among the dripping bushes on that narrow strip of land, he made another discovery —one that stiffened him in his saddle. These bushes had no roots. They had been piled here so as to appear natural to a casual eye on the opposite bank. But actually they were screening the mouth of a tunnel leading back under the cliff.

The Kid whistled low and tonelessly. A tunnel—a cleverly concealed tunnel! No wonder the herd had vanished. Probably a hundred other herds had vanished from the Deadman country in like fashion. With a storm to wash out sign, the raiders had the means of making cattle seemingly disappear from the face of the earth!

Out of saddle, the Kid cautiously edged into the tunnel, leading his horse. The silence of a tomb brooded in the place and the Kid risked a match or two. This was a natural tunnel. Probably the course of a subterranean river that had flowed here once had been changed by some upheaval of nature. The floor was dry and rocky, and the ceiling curved, never less than ten feet high, sometimes twice that height.

The tunnel was straight as an arrow, a faint glow marking its farther end. When the Kid emerged he found a rain-washed moon fighting to pierce the storm-scudded sky. The Kid passed a hand before his unbelieving eyes. Before him spread a valley, hidden behind the cliffs, a lush valley. And not half a mile away sprawled two cabins and a mammoth peeled-pole corral that held the snorting herd.

HERE was a perfect hideout. Rustlers could hold beefs here as long as they chose, leisurely blotting brands before hazing them on to some dubious markets. Irate cattlemen could scour the range beyond the cliffs in vain.

But the Kid wasn't interested in cattle at this moment, nor in the possibilities this place afforded to those who knew its secret entrance. Where were Lana and the riders? Were they prisoners here? One of those cabins was dark and silent but light was showing from the windows of the others. Tying his horse in a clump of dripping bushes, the Kid eased toward the nearest window and raised his eyes above the sill.

In the glow of a flickering lamp on a split-log table he saw eight men inside. Eight big men and little men, on the faces of all the stamp of viciousness. They were talking as they discarded dripping garments. But the Kid didn't wait to try and hear what they were saying. These were the raiders, obviously. The Kid was interested in prisoners.

He crept toward the other cabin. It had only one small window, too small to allow the passage of a human body. The Kid heard restless movements inside and the faint murmur of voices. Scratching on the window sill, he ventured a whispered:

"Lana!"

The window swung inward. "Matt?" the girl whispered excitedly.

"You all right?" he asked. "And the boys? They in there?"

"All except Dave Woods of the Flying V. He was killed when the camp was attacked. Another of the boys was singed, but he isn't badly hurt."

"What's those snaky gents' game?" the Kid wanted to know. "Why did they fetch you here?"

"They didn't intend to," she said. "After the raid but we took the trail after the rustlers. You were missing but we thought we'd find you trailing the herd, too. We followed them to the creek and we thought it was a good place to rush them. But they were too cagy for us. They prodded the herd into an amazing tunnel and ambushed us as we trailed after them. And we walked right into their trap! I managed to fire once before they had us covered."

"I heard the shot," the Kid said. Anger stirred as a new thought crossed his mind. "You shouldn't have taken that trail, girl. The boys shouldn't have

let you take that trail."

"They didn't want to, Matt," she told him. "But what could they do? I'm representing the H, remember?"

IX

SEEING no point in arguing a matter when it wouldn't change the situation, the Kid slipped to the door of the cabin, found it fastened by a heavy padlock and came back to report.

"I could blast it off with my gun," he said. "But the bunch in that other cabin would be on our necks pronto. It's too risky. Any ideas what they aim to do with your outfit?"

"I don't know," Lana admitted. "It looks bad, though, since we've learned the secret of this hideout. They can't let us walk off with that knowledge."

"It's beginning to get light," the Kid observed. "I'm duckin' for cover before they find me here. But I'll be close by and the minute they leave you alone I'll have that door open mighty fast."

He gave her his hand through the window and she gripped it, the four cowhands crowding behind her to whisper brief words of caution and advice. Then the Kid was blending with the shadows. Circling the cabin warily, he climbed to the lip of a cutbank overlooking the other cabin. Stretching himself prone, he waited.

It was a ticklish situation. Lana and the riders from the Deadman country had stumbled upon a secret which must have been jealousy guarded by rustlers for a long time. Yet even such hardcases as these would surely hesitate to kill a woman. But when the eight rustlers trooped out of the cabin in the first pale flush of dawn to stand ringed below him, the Kid had to admit that most of them looked capable of anything.

They were directly beneath him and the cutbank was no more than twelve feet high. He could throw a gun on them from here, hold them at bay and force them to fork over the key to the padlocked cabin. It would be risky, because the odds were eight-to-one. There was a strong chance that at least one of them would go for a gun, forcing a powder-smoke play.

That risk would have to be taken. If the Kid waited, they might leave long enough to give him time to get the prison-cabin open, but they might not. Cautiously he eased his gun out of leather. That slight movement was his undoing. He had forgotten how close he was to the lip of the cutbank and he had forgotten that the rain might have weakened his precarious perch. The earth gave away with a sound like the crack of a gun. Clawing at the air, the Kid found himself tumbling downward in a shower of dirt and gravel, sprawling into the midst of those eight men below him.

A half-dozen guns cleared holsters before the Kid lighted, and he sat up to find himself facing them. Now he was in a tight fix, and nobody knew it better than he did. His mind was racing desperately. It was bluff or die! The Kid managed to force a wry grin across his face.

"Some gents hallo a camp before they step in," he drawled cheerfully. "Me, I've got my own way of making noise."

"Just who the devil are you, mister?" snarled a broad-faced, bearded man, who was almost as immense as Curly Bottsinger. "How did you get here?"

The Kid had expected to be greeted by gunfire but if they were willing to postpone his death even for a minute, he was certainly willing to accept the reprieve.

"South is my name," he said. "Dusty South. I caught a glimpse of you gents pushing your beef herd through a wall—a rock wall. 'Dusty,' I sez, 'either you're loco or full of forty-rod busthead. It ain't natural for cow critters to walk through a wall,' I got so plumb curious I trailed along."

"A curious gent, eh?" the big man growled.

A lean, snaky gent whose face seemed to be mostly nose sidled up.

"He's one of 'em, Cisco," he said. "He's a Deadman waddy we didn't bag last night!"

"I ain't so sure," big Cisco argued. "I studied the crew through glasses yesterday morning. There was five cowhands and the girl. You salivated one of them cowhands. One of 'em was holdin' the herd but he got caught in the stampede during the raid. We got four of 'em and

the girl here, ain't we? That makes this jigger a stray." He pinned a glance on the Kid. "Where's your horse?"

"Yonder in the bushes," the Kid confessed without hesitation.

"Take a look-see at its brand you, Shark Lund," Cisco ordered and the big-nosed man hurried to obey. He was back quickly. "A bay with a brand I never saw before, Yawberry," he reported reluctantly. "It ain't from the Deadman range."

"Where do you hail from, mister?" "Cisco" Yawberry demanded.

The Kid grinned. "Now I ain't askin' you no questions," he reminded. "Can't a gent keep his back-trail to himself?"

IT WAS like teetering on the edge of a volcano, and the Kid wondered how long it would last. But he was still alive, a miracle in itself, for these hardcases had the look of men who might have killed him first and asked questions afterward. It was the very boldness of his attitude that was his saving. He had aroused their curiosity, and perhaps their grudging admiration. The Kid pursued his brash policy with an assurance he was far from feeling.

"Do I smell coffee boilin' in that *cabana*?" he asked. "I'd shore like some."

He was studying the rustlers all the while. He had seen a thousand faces along the Montana-Pacific's right-of-way, and he couldn't know whether he'd seen these eight before. Also, he couldn't be sure whether they'd ever seen him or not. But he had been at end o' steel most of this last month and he was certain this crew hadn't been among the workers, so sure that he was gambling on it. And he was winning, for Cisco Yawberry pouched his gun.

"Fetch him a cup of coffee," the rustler chief ordered.

Squatting cross-legged, the Kid took the steaming cup when it was handed to him. One by one, the men dropped to the ground, forming a semi-circle facing him. Following Yawberry's cue, all the rustlers had leathered their irons but they were eyeing the Kid warily, especially the snaky, big-nosed man who answered to the name of "Shark" Lund.

The Kid knew how fragile was this spell he had cast by his apparent fearlessness. By his own admission, he had trailed them here. What was more to the point, he possessed dangerous knowledge—the secret of that tunnel which served them so well. That made him just as much of a menace to their security as those five prisoners who knew of this hideout. Chances were his fate would be the same as theirs.

The Kid decided on the most desperate bluff of all—a bluff that would shorten his life to a span of a second if it were called. He cursed and reached for his gun, speaking swiftly. The outcome of this play was going to depend on how fast he could talk, rather than on how fast he could unlimber his gun.

"You're not collecting Montana-Pacific head money on me!" he snarled. "I ain't bein' taken alive, savvy!"

He had moved so swiftly as to catch them unawares and though he had wrenched his gun from leather he might have died then. There were eight of them and at least one of them could have got him. But they stared open-mouthed.

"Montana-Pacific head money!" Cisco Yawberry echoed. "You sayin' the railroad's got a price on you?"

"Don't stall!" the Kid spat. "You know well enough it has! You're aimin' on packin' my pelt to Tyler Whitman. I could see it in the eyes of every blasted one of you as you watched me!"

"What's Whitman want you for?" Yawberry demanded.

"You're bluffin'." The Kid laughed. "You know I'm the gent who put a bullet through that long-geared Texas troubleshooter of M.P.'s in Lazura the other day."

"McGrath! Heard tell of him. You killed that gent!"

"As dead as he's ever goin' to be!" the Kid snarled.

Yawberry grinned broadly. "Put away your gun, Dusty," he advised the Kid. "You got us plumb wrong. See that herd yonder? That's beef Montana-Pacific had a notion it was goin' to eat."

His ruse had worked!

That was the Kid's triumphant thought but in the midst of it he knew an almost overpowering temptation. He had this crew under his gun. Why not force the play through as he had planned

before the cutbank had caved? Why not make them release the prisoners? He realized, though, that there was such a thing as pushing luck too far. Besides, he had just paved the way for a better opportunity.

"Rustlers, eh?" The Kid grinned as he pouched his gun. I sort of figured that. But the way you gents kept lookin' at me, I wasn't sure how you stood."

"You're among friends," Yawberry assured him. "Any gent that's had the snake sign put on him by M.P. can ride with this outfit."

"Just a minute, Cisco," Shark Lund put in. "I ain't so shore about this jigger. It's for the boss to say whether he's all right or not, savvy?"

CISCO bristled belligerently.

"Well, he's stayin' here until the boss shows up—tonight or tomorrow. The boss can decide what we'll do with them Deadman cowhands, too, and he can size up Dusty here. But I'm thinkin' he'll sign up this salty gent pronto."

The Kid hadn't hoped to win them all over but Yawberry, who appeared to be in command, had accepted him. But the real chief of this outfit would be along shortly, and the doom of the prisoners would be sealed. Meantime, the Kid still had his gun.

It was the beginning of the longest day in the Gospel Kid's life. He spent the greater part of it squatting in the shadow of the cabin, shaping cigarettes endlessly and spinning windies with the rest. He had a part to play, and he played it well. He might have been as ruthless as any of them, according to his yarns. Shark Lund watched him covertly but the Kid paid the big-nosed man no heed. And before noon came even Lund was less frigid.

A pock-marked little man whose swarthy skin betrayed his mixed blood, cooked a meal. Afterwards the man took food to the other cabin. The Kid watched him indolently as the fellow fished a key from a pocket, unpadlocked the door and, gun in hand, slid the food inside. The door was immediately locked again.

It was the Kid's hope that something would take the rustler crew away during the afternoon. If they left, he would have to go with them, he knew, but he might be able to slip away long enough to return and release the prisoners. But as the hours dragged on, the eight men still loitered about, plainly intending to do nothing. The corraled cattle weren't even turned loose to graze or taken to water, and their irritable bawling became nerve-racking.

Some of the rustlers mended bridles, hunkering near a pile of gear stacked beside a makeshift corral behind the cabins, a small corral which held the horses of the prisoners and their captors. One rustler whittled lazily while two others stretched themselves upon the ground, their sombreros tilted over their noses, and snatched some sleep during the heat of the day.

Convinced that no opportunity would present itself while there was daylight, the Kid also took a nap. He was dead tired, and might need renewed strength before another sunup.

X

WEARILY the day passed, and dusk came at last to purple this hidden valley. Felipe, the cook, stirred himself to activity only after being urged profanely, but it was dark before supper was eaten. As before, Felipe headed then for the other cabin.

The Kid came to his feet, yawning and stretching, his apparent indolence giving no hint of his inner excitement. The time had come to force a play. A lamp had been lighted in the cabin and a poker game was claiming the attention of most of the rustlers. For a moment the Kid, left alone, stalked boldly toward the other cabin. He met Felipe, returning.

"It ees loco, senor," Felipe observed with a flash of white teeth. "Why should I feed thees hombres when tomorrow we keel them perhaps?"

"It's shore crazy," the Kid agreed, and laid his gun-barrel across Felipe's head.

The man went down without a moan. Instantly the Kid was pawing into the cook's pockets, and when he sprinted toward the dark prison cabin, the key was in his hands. He thought he heard hoofs drumming in the distance, but there wasn't time to be concerned about anything but the job ahead.

He got the door open quickly.

"Lana!" he called. "It's me—Matt!"

She came to him at once. "Matt!" she exclaimed thankfully.

"You've got to work fast," he whispered. "I can't stay here long or I'll be missed. You and the boys slip out and get gear onto horses. I'll meet you as soon as I can, and we'll make a break for it!"

A voice was raised in the darkness. "Dusty! Dusty South! Where in thunder are you? Cisco wants you!"

"I've got to go," the Kid panted. "I'll see what Cisco wants and stall him. You do as I told you."

He slid away, stepping over unconscious Felipe, a shapeless huddle in the darkness. There was a prayer in the heart of the Kid that Felipe would stay unconscious for quite a while, and wouldn't be missed. The Kid walked boldly toward the lighted cabin and big Cisco Yawberry was waiting for him just outside the door.

"Step inside, Dusty," Yawberry said. "The boss is here. Come on in and speak your own piece to him."

The Kid remembered those drumming hoofbeats. So the rustler chief had arrived. That complicated things. But he had to stall all of them, the boss included, until Lana and the Deadman cowboys were in saddles. So the Kid stepped into the cabin, to stare slackjawed at the man who awaited him. And if there was amazement in the Kid's eyes, it was mirrored doubly in the eyes of the man he faced. For the boss of this rustling crew was—Hoyt Durham!

Of all the thoughts that flashed through the mind of the Gospel Kid as he faced the man here in this rustlers' lair, two were predominant. Durham's presence here definitely branded the man as one of The Three. Durham, the leader of these night-riding raiders, proved Durham was battling the Montana-Pacific for his own selfish gain. And the game of bluff was over. He couldn't fool Durham. The saloon man knew him, had tried to have him killed in Caprock.

All the outlaws were here in the cabin, except Felipe. Most of the men sat around the table where cards were spread in the kerosene lamp's glow. The instant Durham spoke the pack would be on the Kid.

But he didn't wait for Durham to find his tongue. Instead he kicked over the table and his fist lashed Durham as the table crashed and the lamp went out, leaving the room in darkness. He heard Durham sprawl across the wrecked table and heard men curse as they were pinned beneath the wreckage. Then the Kid was through the doorway.

He had forced the play and had gained the advantage of surprise. No man except Durham had expected him to make a hostile move and even Durham had been unprepared for the Kid's lightning attack. The Kid swung the door shut behind him but instead of bolting into the darkness he grasped the crude door handle and braced one foot against the wall to hold the door shut.

"Lana," he shouted. "Pile into saddles and get! Hell's busted loose!"

CURSING men were tugging at the door from the inside. There were eight of them, providing Durham hadn't been knocked unconscious, but no more than one or two could get their hands on the small inside handle at the same time. They couldn't combine their strength against the Kid's. But one of the rustlers, cooler-headed than the others, was driving bullets through the door, the lead smashing dangerously close to the Gospel Kid. And sooner or later someone was going to climb through a window. All the Kid could hope to do was to stall them for a few more precious minutes.

A rider flashed by him—Lana Herndon.

"Up!" she shouted, and the Kid saw other riders, the Deadman cowhands, fanning wide. He let the door go then, firing twice into the dark interior of the shack as the door swung inward. That lead stopped the first rush of men outside and the Kid swung up behind Lana.

"Got to get my own horse!" the Kid panted. "Can't ride double and outrun 'em!"

But Lana had ideas of her own and suddenly the Kid saw the shape of them when she loped, not toward the distant tunnel, but straight toward the corraled beef herd. The riders with her

were already there and one of them was snaking the corral gate open. The cattle, hungry and thirsty and irritable, charged into the open, the riders whooping and slapping sombreros against their chaps as they spread to flank them.

The herd needed no urging. The cattle smelled water and bolted in that direction. The rustlers' cabin was directly in the path of the herd. The Kid saw Lana's strategy then. With a wild shout, he fired a couple of shots to add to the bedlam just as a half-dozen shadowy figures poured from the cabin.

Those rustlers stopped in their tracks when they found themselves facing that oncoming avalanche of beef. With shrill yells of terror they dashed back into the cabin, as anxious to get inside again as they had been to get out. One of them tripped, went down, came to his feet again—too late. The Kid had a brief glimpse of the fear-twisted face of Shark Lund, saw the man's upflung arms, then Lund vanished, lost beneath a waving, tossing sea of horns as the herd split, surging around the cabin where the other rustlers cowered.

The Deadman crew had turned all of the horses out of the corral and the mounts of the rustlers were swept along by the herd. Behind the racing animals came the Kid and those he had rescued. When they reached the inner mouth of the tunnel the six in saddles sweated to force the fringes of the herd into the cavern. Once that was done, in half an hour the herd was scattered along the stream, drinking their fill. The Kid sat his saddle, gun in hand, his eye on the tunnel's mouth. But none of the rustlers put in an appearance. Shortly the herd was rounded up and headed on the trail.

"Might just as well push 'em on tonight," the Kid decided. "We don't have to worry about those galoots back there. They can't catch us without horses. There's no use tryin' to go back and round up those gents, either. They've got guns a-plenty and we've got one between the bunch of us."

But first they angled to the site of their camp of the night before. And there, on the spot where Dave Woods had died, they buried the valiant Flying V puncher. The Kid read from Hellvation Hank's Bible in the first light of the rising moon, the others standing bareheaded around the shallow grave.

Dawn found them at the camp of the Montana-Pacific's tunnel builders. The Kid thought of rounding up some of the crew and heading back to the hidden valley to round up Yawberry's bunch but decided that would be futile. With the valley's location no longer a secret, the rustlers would hightail from the hideout as fast as feet could carry them.

Lana had gone to a tent to snatch a few hours sleep. When she arose at noon the herd was gone, already headed out for the end of steel, and the Kid waiting for her.

"You're going back to the H-in-a-Hat," he told her firmly. "I'll rep for your dad when the beef's paid for. You've done enough trail drivin'."

She didn't argue. If the smile she gave him was wan, it was also appreciative.

Within an hour they were loping across the rangeland toward the distant H-in-a-Hat, two pygmy figures in that vast stretch of prairie.

AS THEY rode along they talked mostly of Hellvation Hank, for the Kid was hungry for details about the brother he had scarcely known.

"You're so different from him—yet like him, too," Lana said. "Last night, when we buried poor Dave, you might have been Hank. You could hang up your gun and be a sky-pilot, Matt."

He smiled. "I've studied the Bible a heap," he admitted. "But that was to read some meaning into a message Hank left behind him. It's a queer yarn—"

And then he was telling her the whole story of how he had received that bloodstained Bible and had gradually come to understand the significance of the marked references. He told her how he had taken the trail to the north then, and he told her of what he had learned since he'd gone to work for the railroad.

"Goliath, Herod and Judas," he concluded thoughtfully. "I'm sure, now, that Bottsinger is Goliath, for they tell me he stands to lose a heap when the railroad offers a cheaper service to take the place of his highway-robbin' freight line. Hoyt Durham is Herod. If I'd had

any doubts, they went up in smoke when Durham showed up last night. But Judas is the gent I've still got to cut sign on."

"And when you do?" she ventured.

"Like you said—I'm different from Hank," he reminded her, and something in the way he said it made her drop the subject.

XI

DUST was stealing across the rangeland when the Gospel Kid and Lana Herndon reached the H-in-a-Hat, a cluster of buildings cupped in a verdant coulee to shelter them from the winds of winter. This H-in-a-Hat was a cowman's dream, the Kid thought. There could be no better ending to any trail than such a spread as this.

"There's Dad on the porch!" the girl cried excitedly.

"Storm" Herndon was seated in a rocker on the long porch that fronted the ranchhouse and in the graying twilight the Kid could see the rancher. He was anxious to meet Storm Herndon, for he had heard enough about the salty old cattleman to know he was going to like him. But gazing at this sturdy oldster with his seamed, leathery face, with a ragged rim of gray hair fringing a semi-bald head, the Kid stiffened in his saddle.

"We've met before, haven't we?" the Kid said quietly.

"Dad!" Lana cried. "This is—"

Storm Herndon had half-risen from his chair but he settled back again, his eyes aflame as he glared at the Kid, and something about his wild look locked the tongue of his daughter.

"Get out!" Herndon suddenly roared. "Get off this place! Do you savvy? Before I put a slug into you!"

Lana gazed in bewilderment from one man to the other.

"Dad! You don't understand. This man—"

"It's you that don't savvy," her father raged. "But you'll hate this jigger as much as I do when you get the straight of it. Now get, mister—fast!"

The girl's eyes swung toward the Kid and the anguish in them held his tongue.

"Never mind," was all he said before he touched spurs to his horse, rode out of the ranch yard, and turned his back upon the man he had fought in Crowfoot Gulch the night he had witnessed the dynamiting of the trestle, the man he had last seen rolling down the slope of the gulch!

He heard Lana call him, but he paid no heed. He wanted to put distance between himself and the H-in-a-Hat. There was plenty to think about!

Storm Herndon—dynamiter! That didn't make sense. Yet the rancher had been in the gulch that night and he had flared up at the sight of the Kid, the one man who knew he had been there. That cinched the rancher's guilt, but the Kid didn't want to believe the obvious. Still, Tyler Whitman himself had warned that Herndon might not be an ally. "He hates the railroad and makes no bones about it," Whitman had said. "If Herndon gets it into his head to buck the road, he'll fight hard . . ."

Did Herndon hate the railroad so much that he was using any means to fight it? It looked like it. Herndon was a die-hard who wanted to cling to the old days and the old ways. But his daughter had been on the train which would have plunged into Crowfoot Gulch if the Kid hadn't stopped it. Had Herndon known Lana was on that train?

And what about the fact that hired outlaws of The Three had run off a beef herd belonging to Deadman ranchers? That herd had been jointly owned by six spreads. Had Herndon included his own cattle to keep suspicion from himself? Had he allowed his daughter to go with the herd, knowing that no matter how much lead might be scattered, she would not be hurt? She had appeared to be in danger of her life in the hidden valley. But where was the proof that she actually had been in peril? Perhaps she would have been spared, not because she was a woman, but because she was Storm Herndon's girl.

There was much the Kid didn't know, but there were certainly signs that Storm Herndon might be betraying the other ranchers, and betraying his friend, Tyler Whitman.

But there was no indication that Lana was aware of her father's perfidy. The Kid found some consolation in that as

he wrestled with the problem across the lonely miles.

He was no nearer a solution when he unlimbered himself from his saddle in Lazura the next day. His first duty was to report to Tyler Whitman, but instead he went to the telegraph office. Key O'Dade had been moved from Caprock to this new boom-town and the squat Irishman was at his instrument.

"Look," said the Kid. "Can you dig something out of the records for me? I've got to know if Storm Herndon got a wire from his girl in April, a wire saying she'd be coming to Caprock on a certain train."

O'DADE scratched his head.

"Shure and this is a railroad telegraph. Sich wires as we send for other folks is for the promotin' of good will. There's no record of thim, bhoy."

"But can't you remember?" the Kid asked desperately. "Think hard!"

O'Dade's face corrugated with the effort. "I'm thinkin' there was no sich wire, but it's no oath I'll be takin' on it," he decided. "No, bhoy, I can't tell yez for sure."

The Kid turned into the clamorous street, his face grim. There was nothing to dispel the black shadow of suspicion that clouded his mind. All signs said Storm Herndon was an enemy of the railroad, a far more ruthless enemy than he claimed to be, a betrayer of his neighbors and his friends—a Judas!

It looked as though the Kid had found his third man. But where was the satisfaction in that when the man was Lana's father?

The steel reached Deadman the second week in July, rejuvenating the torpid town. With hammers pounding day and night, a score of buildings blossomed to lengthen the false-fronted street. Deadman had accented the heritage of turmoil bequeathed by a dying Lazura and a dead Caprock.

On the last day of July the rails were twenty miles beyond Deadman and the Big Thunders echoed to the clang of sledge against spike and the puffing of the work-trains. The Montana-Pacific's first tunnel had passed the beginning of the mountain barrier without a wasted day.

The Kid was always at end o' steel. Under the blistering sun he was everywhere and anywhere, sometimes pumping a handcar up and down the right-of-way, alert for trouble that never materialized, sometimes swinging a sledge or lending a hand when the track-layers deposited the shining steel upon the ladder of ties.

He was a troubled man; a man whose waking hours were a torture, and who worked ceaselessly so that he might sleep and forget when night came. He grew lean and morose and his easy grin was gone. There was no enthusiasm in him, even though each day brought victory nearer and rumor whispered that the Central Western was so far behind as to be almost out of the race.

When the Kid had come back after the delivery of the beef herd, his report to Whitman had been brief.

"We got the herd through," he had said. "Had some trouble with rustlers. Hoyt Durham was the head of those wideloopers. Herndon's girl was reppin' for her dad but I chased her home."

"I'll send Herndon's money to him by one of the Deadman cowboys," Whitman had promised, then arched his brows thoughtfully. "Looks like Durham's one of The Three, eh? The tough part is that we can't do a thing to him. When there isn't any law you can't arrest a man. And even if we could, it would be your word against his. But at least we know he's an enemy. I can hit him where it'll hurt the worse—in his pocketbook. I'll post an order that no M. P. man is to patronize his place. If you run into Durham, you can use your own judgment what to do."

It was all that was ever said about the matter but that was the reason for the Kid's turmoil. It was his duty to tell Whitman the whole story, including his suspicions concerning Storm Herndon. And it was the Kid's duty—to himself—to force a showdown with Hoyt Durham. But he didn't run into the man, or Curly Bottsinger either, for the simple reason that the Kid chose to avoid the pair—and hated himself for doing it.

He was beaten—beaten by a slip of a girl. But he was honest enough to face the fact. He had sworn to kill three

men—Goliath and Herod and Judas. One was as guilty as the others, yet if his torturing suspicions were true, how could he kill Lana Herndon's father? And what could he say before the tribunal of his own conscience if he wreaked vengeance upon Durham and Bottsinger and spared the third man?

That was why the Kid worked like a demon from morning to night, until he began to sense that a man may move swiftly, but never so fast that he can escape from himself. But still he toiled on with the heart gone out of him until Tyler Whitman, misunderstanding, called him aside on that last day of July.

"Are you trying to build this railroad single-handed, Matt?" he chided. "There's a limit to what one man can do, but you don't seem to realize it. The trouble seems to be all over, and you've earned a rest. Take a couple days off and go to Deadman and have some fun. That's an order, understand?"

THE KID didn't argue. There was no lure for him in Deadman but he took the work-train back to town, finding the blackness of the tunnel enroute no darker than his mood. He alighted, swung along another clamorous street, seeing the same signs that had adorned Caprock and Lazura, hearing the same barkers shouting from a dozen saloon doorways. He swung past the tent housing Thackery Weaver's *End O' Steel Echo,* quickening his pace, for he was in no frame of mind to listen to the garrulous editor. He turned into the Palace Hotel for want of a better place to spend his time.

The room he was given overlooked the alley and the Kid sat before the window, staring out with brooding eyes, the clamor of the street beating against him as it rose from the distance. He got an idea of going on a good toot, and was annoyed to find that such an inspiration no longer held any allure for him. And while he sat there, wrapped in gloomy thought, he saw a figure steal surreptitiously down the alleyway below and recognized the gaunt, seedy-looking man —Shadow Loomis.

The Kid's interest quickened. He had never got any more than within shouting distance of Shadow Loomis since that day in Caprock when he had bought liquor for for the man—which Loomis had poured into a cuspidor. But the Kid had thought of Loomis often and had wanted to talk to him. So now the Gospel Kid swung a leg over the window sill, dropped to the roof of a low shed flanking the rear of the hotel, and leaped to the ground. Loomis was angling out of the alley when the Kid next glimpsed the man and he followed silently and swiftly.

The trail of Shadow Loomis was a sinuous one and sometimes the Kid was hard put to keep him in sight. But he managed and was still trailing when Loomis scuttled into a small shack on the outskirts of the town, a sagging-roofed shack so decrepit-looking as to be a fitting abode for the dissolute man. Was this where Loomis lived? When the Kid pressed an ear to the outer wall he heard only the slight movements of one man inside.

The Kid opened the door without knocking and stepped inside.

A crude table, a few crippled chairs, a cot and a rusty stove furnished the single room. Loomis was seated behind the table, and just for an instant astonishment crossed his face as he recognized the Kid. Then his eyes became as bleary-looking as ever and his voice held its familiar whining note.

"What you doing here?" he demanded with a show of truculence.

"I've come for a palaver," said the Kid, "and I ain't in a mood to mess with words. Just who in blazes are you —and what's your game?"

"Game?" Loomis countered, half-cringing. "I'm just a gent that's down on his luck. I'm not making trouble for anybody."

"That's all you've got to say?"

"That's all," Loomis quavered.

The Kid swept the table aside with a brush of his hand and he was upon Loomis in the same motion, his fingers gripping the man's stringy throat.

"Talk, curse you!" the Kid gritted. "Talk up—and fast! You've followed the steel all the way from Caprock. You sneak and you snoop, and you're always around. Mister, maybe you're one of The Three. You've got a lot of explainin' to do. Start talkin'!"

XII

LOOMIS, gasping, managed to speak.

"The Three!" he spluttered. "You figure I'm—"

"I don't know," the Gospel Kid said truthfully, for suddenly he was a little ashamed of his own belligerence.

This seedy-looking individual was a man of mystery, all right, but where was the proof that he was also a man of evil? The Kid realized that he, himself, was clutching at straws, looking in vain for another Judas, when he had already found the real one.

"Wait!" Loomis cried. "I'll show you how wrong you are!"

He scurried to his cot and dragged something from beneath it.

"Look!" he said. "Do you still think I'm on *their* side of the fence?"

"Another one!" the Kid exclaimed, and all of the doubt left him as Loomis held aloft a pine headboard much like the one the Kid had seen in Dan Callishaw's room back in Caprock. The lettering read:

HERE LIES S. LOOMIS
Died August 15, 18—
HIS EARS WAS TOO BIG FOR THE
SIZE OF HIS HEAD

"August fifteenth!" the Kid said. "Shucks, man, that's only a couple of weeks away! Just why have they put the deadwood on you?"

Loomis thrust the headboard out of sight and, as he regarded the Kid thoughtfully, the bleariness went out of his eyes and his shoulders straightened.

"Maybe I'd better tell you the truth," he decided, and even his voice had changed. "They're after me because they suspect what I really am. Here—feel."

He took the Kid's hand, pressing it against his shabby corduroy coat and the Kid felt the bulge of something sewed inside the lining.

"Government credentials," Loomis explained.

The Kid's eyes widened. "A Government man! Doing what?"

"Keeping an eye on the race between the M. P. and the C. W. The Government has promised to subsidize the first road to cross the Big Thunders. A bond issue and a gift of a couple hundred feet of right-of-way on both sides of the rails isn't to be sneezed at. But the Government wants the race to be fair. I'm here to watch."

"But why didn't you let us know?" the Kid demanded. "Why didn't you tell Whitman, or Kurt Ormond?"

"I was told to work incognito, playing whatever rôle I saw fit. I came to Caprock last fall, pretending to be a sort of drunken remittance man. That's how I met up with Hellvation Hank."

"You knew Hank?"

Loomis smiled wryly. "Knew him? He tried to save me from what he thought I was! He worked hard to keep me away from the whisky I appeared to be drinking. Yes, I knew him—and respected him highly. It was to Hank that I first spoke of The Three—something I had no business doing. But the railroad meant a lot to Hank."

The Kid was all excitement. "You know who The Three are?" he demanded.

"I know the identity of two of them," Loomis admitted. "Since I'm pretty sure the M. P. also knows, there isn't any reason why I shouldn't speak the names of Durham and Bottsinger. I don't know who the third man is. But Hank did some snooping himself, and he learned the whole truth, somehow, for he told me so. 'Come to church and maybe you'll hear all three names,' he told me. That night he died."

"But you've got your suspicions," the Kid said bluntly. "I'm askin' you, as one man to another, is Storm Herndon tied up with The Three?"

"I don't know," Loomis said. "Once I managed to search Durham's private office, but I couldn't find a thing to implicate anybody. Herndon was in Caprock last fall, though, and this spring too. Nobody's talked more against the railroad than he has. If I was troubleshooter for M. P., McGrath, I'd have a plain talk with him."

"You're dead right!" the Kid said slowly. "And I'm going to do it—pronto."

He extended his hand, a ghost of his old grin crossing his face.

"I'm sorry I mussed you up," he said. "Take care of yourself. When those boys send out those timber tombstones,

they're not jokin'."

"I know it," Loomis said soberly. "I'm going to hole-up in the Big Thunders for a couple of weeks. So long, McGrath. Keep what I've told you under your hat. The information was for Hank McGrath's brother, not for the M. P. trouble-shooter."

"They're two different fellows—sometimes," the Kid conceded gravely and left.

HIS DESTINATION was miles away —the H-in-a-Hat spread. He was going to have a showdown with Storm Herndon. The very fact of having made the decision lifted some of the load he had been shouldering. But before he left Deadman he went to the railroad office to see if there were any new orders. Key O'Dade greeted him gravely.

"Faith and it was looking for ye, I was," the Irishman said. "This wire came from Whitman for ye. 'Tis bad news, me bhoy, bad news."

The Kid ran his eye over the slip Whitman had wired:

WATCH YOUR BACK. HEADBOARD SIMILAR TO ONE SENT CALLISHAW FOUND IN YOUR TENT. NAMES AUGUST SECOND AS DAY OF YOUR DEATH.

"August second," the Kid mused, as he balled the slip in his fist. "Time enough to get to the H-in-a-Hat anyway."

In ten minutes he was swinging aboard a work-train headed for end o' steel . . .

The Golden Slipper Saloon was in Deadman now, with the dying of Lazura, a more substantial layout since it was rumored that Deadman might enjoy a boom until the spring. But though prepared to continue reaping a golden harvest, the Golden Slipper was a silent, gloomy place, for Tyler Whitman's word was law and the M. P. men shunned Hoyt Durham's establishment.

The blacklisting had been a bitter blow for Durham. Disgust was in his swarthy face as he sat in his private office situated, as usual, behind "The Lady of the Nile." A black mood was upon Curly Bottsinger, too.

"McGrath headed back for end o' steel," he reported. "One of the boys saw him catch the train. But that wooden warning ain't goin' to scare that gent! We're wastin' our time scarin' small fry like Shadow Loomis, too."

The third man was in a buoyant mood and he smiled expansively.

"If Loomis is what I think he is, he isn't small fry," he observed. "If I'm wrong, what difference does it make what happens to a barfly? I don't expect the headboard to scare McGrath into running, but it will probably keep him out at end o' steel for the next couple of days. He won't be in Deadman to smell a rat when things begin to happen."

Hoyt Durham was the first to understand what he meant, and suddenly the saloon owner was smiling eagerly.

"You mean you're ready to pull the big act?" he demanded. "The time has come for the real showdown?"

"Exactly. Cisco Yawberry and his bunch will be in town just as soon as they finish that little business out on the Deadman range. And everybody else is ready, since we've planned this for weeks. No slip-ups, remember! It's got to work like a clock!"

He poured himself a drink from Durham's private bottle, as did the other two, hoisting their glasses together.

"To the downfall of the Montana-Pacific," toasted the third man. "And to the greater glory of the Central Western."

"To the hell that's goin' to be turned loose!" Bottsinger added darkly, and downed his drink in a single gulp . . .

The Gospel Kid, on his way to the H-in-a-Hat spread, rode the work-train to the end of the tracks. He burned with a desire to see Herndon, to rid himself of his festering suspicions, or to force the old rancher to show his hand. But first the Kid wanted to see Tyler Whitman. He found the railroad-builder in his private coach on a siding.

"I'm glad you came back!" Whitman said, with a worried frown. "One of the boys poked into your tent for something and found that headboard I wired you about. I'd like to think it's a bluff, Matt, but I'm not so sure. They weren't bluffing when they sent the same warning to Dan Callishaw."

Whitman produced the headboard.

The lettering read:

HERE LIES MATTHEW MCGRATH
Born January 1, 18—
Died August 2, 18—
HE WAS LUCKY—BUT HIS
LUCK RAN OUT

The Kid scarcely gave it a glance.

"I'm quitting the railroad," he told Whitman. "No, I'm not runnin' out on account of that headboard. It's just like I told Kurt Ormond once—I've got two jobs to do. One was working for the railroad. I said if it ever happened I had to take care of the other job first, I'd leave the railroad. Looks like now I've got some business of my own to tend to—important business. I'm takin' a little pasear across the range."

WHITMAN regarded him thoughtfully.

"Have it your way, boy," he decided at last. "I'll ask no questions. And I'll feel better if you're somewhere else for a spell. But I want you to know that we've got a place for you here whenever you finish this other job of yours. And be careful!"

Ten minutes after they'd shaken hands the Kid was in saddle, following the rails back through the tunnel and beyond it, then angling northward. He made a fireless camp when night overtook him not far from the cliffs that barricaded the hidden valley. Most of the day his mind had been upon what might happen at the end of this trail. It wasn't until he was stretched upon his saddle blanket, studying the stars and smoking a last cigarette, that it came to him with something of a start that his birth date as lettered on the headboard had been the correct date.

That was queer. Dan Callishaw's birth date had been correct, too, but Callishaw had given information to Thackery Weaver which the editor had used in his newspaper write-up about Callishaw. Callishaw's birth date had become public knowledge.

On the other hand, Loomis' headboard had mentioned no birth date. But Loomis, seemingly a barfly, wouldn't be in the list of names and data Thackery Weaver had kept, the list the editor had claimed had been stolen.

But no man from Caprock to the Big Thunders had known the birth date of Matt McGrath, save Hellvation Hank. And Hank was dead. The Kid went to sleep trying to solve the riddle.

With morning he gave it no further thought. The miles were unreeling behind him and he was nearing the lush coulee that sheltered the H-in-a-Hat buildings. And his mind once more was only on what he had to say to Storm Herndon when he faced that fiery cattleman.

XIII

BELOW the ranchhouse, the trail dipped into the coulee where the ravine was narrower and riotous with rose briars, serviceberry bushes, and a few scraggy fir trees. The shrubbery formed a screen of sorts.

The Gospel Kid rounded a turn to find himself facing an approaching rider. His heart leaped. It was Lana, in levis and jumper and floppy sombrero.

For a silent moment they faced each other as each jerked to a halt.

"Matt!" Lana cried then. "You've come back!" Something in his face made her voice falter.

"I've come to see your father, Lana," he said. "Maybe you can guess why. But tell me one thing first, Lana—something I've *got* to know. Did you wire him you were coming to Caprock by train last spring?"

"No, I didn't. I was coming home against his orders. I . . . Oh, I see what you're driving at! That dynamiting in Crowfoot Gulch. Matt, there was such a ghastly misunderstanding about that! After Dad drove you off the place, I demanded that he explain and he did."

"I'm listenin'," the Kid said woodenly.

"Dad was in Caprock that night and he happened to see a bunch of riders head out of town leading a pack-horse with a box of dynamite loaded on it. He thought Curly Bottsinger was heading the outfit, but he wasn't sure. The more he thought about it, the more he wondered what Bottsinger intended doing with dynamite along the railroad right-of-way. Bottsinger hated the railroad because it meant the finish of his freight line. Dad hated the railroad too, but

he couldn't stomach underhanded fighting. He fretted about it until he decided to follow those riders. He trailed them to Crowfoot Gulch. He left his horse and crept to a ledge for a better look, but got there too late. He just barely had time to shelter himself behind an outcropping of rocks when the blast went off."

"I savvy," said the Kid, but there was skepticism in his voice.

"But you don't!" she countered. "Dad recognized you as the man who'd jumped him in the gulch. All he could do that night was fight back. He thought *you* were one of the dynamiters. Do you wonder that he flew into a rage when he saw you again?" Her lips quivered. "I'll always remember what you said when I thanked you for saving our lives. 'I just happened along,' you said. 'It might have been anybody!' Dad just happened along, too. Doesn't that entitle him to the benefit of the doubt?"

"It does," the Kid conceded. "And yet the whole thing is too pat—too pat. He claims to be Ty Whitman's friend in spite of their difference of opinion about the railroad. Why didn't he tell Whitman about the explosion?"

"He couldn't even be positive it was Bottsinger he'd seen," she said wearily. "Besides, you don't understand Dad's viewpoint, Matt. He loves the old ways, which is why he hates the railroad. I did, too, until you pointed out that real towns would grow out of the debris of the dreadful boom-towns. Maybe Dad will see it some day. Deep in his heart he has a real admiration for Ty Whitman. And he did deliver beef to Whitman just as he had promised he would. Why, only last week he told me he'd deliver more if Whitman's price was right. Our whole crew is back in the hills now, cutting out stuff to build a herd for the railroad."

"Why not?" the Kid rasped. "The rustling of railroad beef is finished now that the hidden valley isn't any secret. A man couldn't *pretend* to be selling beef to the railroad any longer. He'd either have to actually deliver, or admit he'd as soon the graders starved."

Her eyes widened with horror. "I see," she said. "I see it all! You think Dad's a—a Judas! You think he's one of The Three!"

"God knows I don't want to think it!" The Kid's voice was dull with pain. "But I've got to go and talk to him, Lana, straighten this thing out—forever."

"No!" she cried and swung her horse to block the trail. "I can't let you! Can't you understand? He flayed you because he thought you were a sneaking dynamiter. He's sorry for that now, but you're still a railroad man. Dad would be bitter. You're bitter, too, and if you accused him of being one of The Three, he might say he was, just to spite you and Ty Whitman!"

"The blood call is strong, Lana."

"Dad clings to an idea like a burr clings to a saddle-blanket," she hurried on. "He has the same opinion of you that I once had, the opinion we formed when we saw how Hank suffered for your sins. That's another reason I can't let you go to Dad. He doesn't know that the Gospel Kid is a different man than Matt McGrath of Texas. He liked Hank a lot, Matt. If you knew how much, you'd know that Dad couldn't be one of The Three."

STILL the Kid's eyes were stern. The two were close to each other now and she laid a hand on his shoulder as she lifted her eyes to his.

"Matt," she said, "every girl meets a certain man some time—the *one* man. I always felt that I'd know mine the moment I saw him. Would it make any difference to you if I told you I met him beyond Crowfoot Gulch? Would it matter if I told you I wanted to hate him when I discovered who he was—but that I couldn't?"

He gently took her hand from his shoulder. "Would it matter?" he repeated. "Lana, I've always been a tumbleweed, and I never cared much if I ever took roots. Yet when I saw that hidden valley, I began thinkin' what a nice place it would be to have a spread with a few cattle under my iron. I've been lookin' for such a place ever since —since the night I stopped the train. Don't you savvy how it is with me, Lana? Can't you understand that I've been fighting against a showdown with Storm Herndon, fighting for two months now?"

In this most unorthodox fashion they declared their love and there was irony to transcend irony because what shone in her eyes was mirrored in the Kid's and yet he couldn't seal their declaration with a kiss, for there was still a lingering doubt in him.

"I want to believe you," he said hoarsely. "I—I do believe you. But why didn't you come and tell me the real reason he ran me off the place? Two months I've waited and wondered."

"I wanted to come," she said. "But I couldn't leave him again. You see, when he rolled down the gulch that night, he landed in a cluster of rocks. He was hurt, but he managed to reach his horse and get away. Since then he's grown steadily worse. The doctor from Deadman says he'll get over it in time. But for the last two months he's scarcely been able to leave a chair. There is no bitterness like the bitterness of a cripple, Matt."

"A cripple!" the Kid echoed, horror in his voice, and then he was remembering Storm Herndon half-rising from his chair and settling back again.

But he was thinking of something else, too, something that left him weak and trembling—a mental picture of himself forcing a showdown with a fiery, vitriolic rancher, Storm Herndon going for his gun and he, the Kid, beating him to the draw, only to discover too late that he'd fought a cripple!

"That's why I was repping for Dad with the herd," Lana went on. "I didn't tell you about it, because I knew you'd see for yourself when you met him."

"I'm mighty sorry, Lana," he said. "I—"

That was as far as he got for suddenly guns were barking in the distance, echoing along the coulee. Those guns were speaking at the H-in-a-Hat ranchhouse, where a crippled oldster was, alone and defenseless. Instantly the man and the girl were spurring their horses in a wild gallop down the coulee which broadened out where the ranch buildings sprawled ahead of them.

Thundering away in the opposite direction, bent low over saddle-horns, were seven riders. Leading them was Cisco Yawberry, a bearded giant in a saddle. There was no mistaking him. But the Kid was more intent on following Lana who was hurling herself from her horse and running toward the long porch.

Then the Kid saw what she had seen, and the sight that met his eyes was proof enough that Storm Herndon was no ally of The Three. For Storm Herndon lay upon the planking of the porch in a shapeless heap, and his shirt front was soggy with blood.

Quickly the Kid dropped to his knees beside the fallen rancher, making a brief, but comprehensive examination. He glanced up, and he and Lana looked at each other across the body of her father. He read the desperate question in her agonized eyes.

"He's alive," he said.

She said nothing then, nor did she ever, to remind him that he had misjudged Storm Herndon.

"How badly is he hurt?" she asked, and drew a look of admiration from the Kid because her voice was so firm.

Along the Kid's smoky back-trail he had seen many men laid low by lead and he could gauge the seriousness of Herndon's wound with an accuracy that was almost professional.

"We've got to get him to a doctor as fast as we can take him there," he said. "I've fished out a few bullets in my time but I wouldn't dare probe for that one. It's too near his heart. Can you get a wagon ready?"

BY THE TIME she had a team hitched to a buckboard he had rummaged inside the house and found bandages, and whisky for an antiseptic, and had doctored the stricken rancher as best he could. Herndon's pulse was feeble but the thread of life was still there. The man and the girl lifted him into the wagon bed with infinite care, making the unconscious man as comfortable as possible in a nest of blankets. It was not until after they had put the ranchhouse behind them that Lana spoke again.

"They must have learned that Dad was going to keep on supplying the M. P. with beef!" she burst out. "That Yawberry outlaw was sent here to kill him if there was no other way to stop him!"

"But he isn't dead," the Kid reminded her. "And the doc out at end o' steel is a mighty good one. He'll patch him up pronto."

After that little was said. Lana, back in the wagon bed, crouched beside the still figure of her father. It was a nightmare journey, though, for contrition rode with the Gospel Kid. But with the realization that he had passed judgment on an innocent man came a determination to save the life of Storm Herndon if human endeavor could make that miracle possible.

It seemed an endless trek along an endless trail. His urge was to lash the team into a gallop, but on this rough ground he didn't dare. He could only crawl along, seemingly at a snail's pace, conscious that the slightest jar might lessen Herndon's chance of living.

Once the rancher opened his eyes. "You ain't tellin' me who I can sell my beef to," he muttered, and lapsed into unconsciousness again.

Obviously he was deliriously repeating something he'd said to Cisco Yawberry when that rustler and his crew had swooped down upon the ranch, evidence enough that Lana's intuition had been right, that she had unerringly put her finger on the reason for the shooting of her father.

The Kid's eyes were peeled for Yawberry and his riders as they rolled along. But the prairie lay bare before them as far as they could see. The long day spent itself at last, and darkness overtook them, but still they plodded onward.

XIV

NOW at least there was a moon to light the way and the Gospel Kid, guided by Lana Herndon who knew this range, finally came onto a road of sorts. After that the wounded man was not jostled as badly as he had been. With the moon climbing above them and the stars sparkling against the dark canopy of the heavens, they headed toward end o' steel. And sometime during the night they reached the rails.

To Deadman town now, or to end o' steel? The Kid made a quick decision.

"End o' steel is closer and chances are the sawbones will be there," he said. "If he isn't, we can pack your dad back to town by train."

Lana smiled wanly. "We'll have to keep him unconscious if we expect to get *him* on a train, I imagine."

The Kid turned the team paralleling the rails. He watched for the headlight beams of a locomotive, hoping that a work-train might come along. If one did, he could flag it and get Storm Herndon into camp far faster than in this slow-moving buckboard.

But the moon had faded by the time they reached the railroad tunnel and with it faded the Kid's hope that a train was running.

He knew there wasn't room enough for a wagon to skirt the tracks inside the bore, so had to force the team up onto the tracks, which shook the wagon violently. Lana cradled her father's head in her lap, easing some of the shock, and then they were in the black depth of the tunnel, guided only by the rails they followed. As fervently as the Kid had wished for the coming of a train before, he now prayed that the track would be clear. When they reached the end of the tunnel safely he sighed his relief.

"Four—five miles to camp," he told Lana.

Dawn was breaking as they came to the end of the steel. But the flame of life still flickered in Storm Herndon and the grueling race with death was nearly won.

They rounded a curve to see the camp sprawled ahead. Then the Kid knew instantly that something here was almighty wrong.

Men were swarming everywhere, pouring from tents and construction shacks in various stages of undress, rushing about like leaderless ants. Someone pounded an iron triangle. On a siding a locomotive puffed, its whistle beginning to scream.

Tyler Whitman was in the midst of it all, bare-headed, his gray hair flying as he gesticulated, issuing orders that were lost in the roar of startled voices. Leaping from the wagon seat, the Kid stumbled stiffly to him.

"What's goin' on?" he demanded.

"You're back!" Whitman roared. "Good! It's a showdown! Central West-

ern has struck—hard. I should have expected something like this! We've got them licked so they've become desperate. They're risking everything to break our back with one blow!"

"But where are they striking?" the Kid asked.

"In Deadman. All night long Bottsinger's stage-coaches and freight wagons have been bringing men into town—toughs from the C.W. camps. They're taking over Deadman, lock, stock and barrel. They can tear up our tracks, keep supplies from coming through. And without steel we're bogged down—licked!"

"Storm Herndon's in that wagon," the Kid reported with a jerk of his thumb. "He was shot down, wounded bad, because he insisted on selling beef to you. Where's the doc?"

"Storm — wounded!" Whitman groaned. "The doctor went into Deadman with Kurt Ormond before the trouble broke. Key O'Dade started a message through when the toughs began taking over the town. Either the wire was cut or Key was dragged away from the instrument. The line's dead. But I'm taking every man into Deadman to give them their fight! I'll hook on my own coach. Have Storm loaded into it. We'll get him to the doctor!"

"Mister, I'm working for the railroad again," the Kid said, and was off.

Confusion was thrice-multiplied as a locomotive backed up to a string of flatcars with Tyler Whitman's private car coupled to the front of them. Onto the flatcars piled the M.P. workers, hundreds of them, and even horses were forced up plank inclines to be taken along. There were few guns in the camp but those available were passed around. The rest of the men chose hickory pick-handles, or any other sort of weapon they could lay their hands on.

WHITMAN personally supervised the loading of Storm Herndon into his car and climbed in. The Gospel Kid had one last glimpse of Lana's pale, strained face as she followed her father. Then the Kid swung into the locomotive cab just as the huge iron monster lurched to life, gathering momentum as it rolled along the unballasted roadway.

They were on their way to Deadman, the whole fighting force of the Montana-Pacific, to meet the challenge of the Central Western. Would they be too late to prevent the vandalism that would spell the finish of the M.P.? It was a desperate play the rival railroad was making, but if the Central Western was victorious today, then the Central Western would be victorious in the race for Government subsidization.

Let the matter come to court later. How could a bankrupt Montana-Pacific wage a courtroom battle? The real fight would be in Deadman.

There was Shadow Loomis to be considered but even though Loomis might report his findings to his superiors later, by his own admission he could identify only two of the three men who were behind this underhanded fight against the M.P. And Shadow Loomis might not even be alive.

The Kid's head was craned from the cab window while a sweating fireman toiled beside him. They were almost at the tunnel when the Kid suddenly saw Shadow Loomis ahead of them, in the middle of the track. He had emerged from the tunnel's black mouth astride a horse and he was racing straight toward the oncoming train, gesticulating wildly.

The engineer, leaning from the opposite window, saw the Government man, and reached for the brake lever. With steel grinding against steel as the train slid to a stop, the Kid was out of the cab just as Loomis flung himself from his horse.

"Thank God you stopped in time!" the man panted. "The tunnel's doomed!"

"Doomed!" the Kid echoed.

"It's going to be dynamited! I took to the hills like I told you I would. Not more than half an hour ago I saw riders working with dynamite, tamping charges into drill holes above the eastern end of the tunnel. The head of the outfit was that bearded fellow who's been around Deadman a time or two lately — Yawberry, they call him. They're going to close the tunnel, I tell you!"

So shooting Storm Herndon wasn't the only devil's work that Cisco Yawberry had had to do for The Three! But that wasn't what made the Kid stare,

horror and despair in his eyes. The tunnel was doomed! A thousand tons of rocks and earth would soon be blocking it, making it impassable for weeks. Truly The Three had planned a master stroke to defeat the M.P., for the fighting forces of the Montana-Pacific would be shut off from Deadman. They might reach the town by other routes, afoot and on horseback, but too late. And Storm Herndon who was dying would never reach the doctor in time!

"How soon will they be lighting the fuse? "the Kid demanded. "Quick! How much time is there left?"

"I don't know," Loomis said shakily. "My idea was to get away and stop any train that might be coming. Maybe the fuse has already been lighted. Man, you aren't thinking of—"

But the Kid had swung back into the cab.

"I could pass the word back along the flatcars and take a vote," he said. "That would take time we maybe haven't got to spare. I know these M.P. men, Loomis. I've worked with them for weeks and I know the way they'd want to do this. You with me, engineer? *We're going through that tunnel!*"

The engineer nodded, tight-lipped. "If this train goes any place, I go with it," he said and tugged at the throttle.

Shadow Loomis, something of both admiration and awe in his face, swung into the cab. Right behind him came Whitman who had clambered from his own car to learn the cause of the stop.

"I had to make the decision for you," the Kid said.

"But Herndon's girl!" Whitman exclaimed. "She's aboard, too!"

He didn't need to remind the Kid. But he thought of the brave tilt of Lana's chin as she had asked how badly her father was wounded, her stoical suffering on the long ride across the prairie. The life of Storm Herndon depended on his getting into Deadman. The Kid made Lana's decision for her, knowing well what that decision would have been.

"She'd want it this way," he said softly.

THE DRIVERS spun and caught, and the train moved forward, picking up speed as it went. The dark mouth of the tunnel yawned and they were swallowed by it and only the glow of the firebox broke the enveloping darkness. A hush fell upon the four men in the cab, for the same thought was in the mind of each.

How many seconds before the mountain came down on top of them?

To the Kid it seemed as though the train crept at a snail's pace through the tunnel, but that was only because time was standing still. Acually the locomotive had gathered speed and in spite of the drag of the heavy load behind, it was running the tunnel faster than it had ever been run before.

With his head poked out of the cab window, the Kid saw the white eye of the tunnel's end through the choking, blinding smoke that bannered backward into his face. How far away that early daylight seemed!

Every sound was magnified — the scream of steam from the pistons, the pound of drivers over the unleveled rails, even the scrape of the fireman's shovel as he heaved coal into the firebox in a frenzy. Yet above all this bedlam, the Kid's ears were alert for the crack of doom, the first faint sound that might herald a devastating blast.

He heard it, too. But not until the locomotive had hurtled into the feeble dawn light again, and not until the last loaded flatcar was in the clear! Then the explosion came, the roar shaking the locomotive while the face of the mountain writhed before the Kid's horrified eyes. The wall above the tunnel groaned and collapsed. Then there was only billowing dust, the roar of a dynamite-sired avalanche, and the tunnel was sealed behind them.

"Stop the train!" Tyler Whitman ordered and the Kid wondered if his own face was as white and strained as the railroad builder's.

When the locomotive squealed to a stop again, Whitman piled out of the cab, but he returned shortly.

"Get going," he said briefly to the engineer, then turned to the Kid. "I unloaded a dozen men with guns and horses. Those dynamiters aren't far away and the boys have orders to round them up if it takes until Doomsday. The rest of us will clean up Deadman!"

XV

RIGHT after Whitman had his say the locomotive was moving again, and this time the heart of the iron cayuse might really have been in the race. With flanges screaming as they struck curve after curve, the cab swaying and pitching, it raced down the track toward Deadman, the engineer throwing his weight upon the whistle cord while the Kid spelled the weary fireman. And in this, Montana-Pacific's darkest hour, Matt McGrath sensed just how much the road had come to mean to him.

"I'm glad I got back in time," he told Whitman as Loomis took the shovel.

"Every fighting man will count, son," Whitman said. "I'm glad you finished your other business, too."

The Kid told him about it then, told him of his suspicion concerning Storm Herndon, and of the way he had been proved wrong. Whitman heard him in stupefied silence.

"If only you'd told me this in the first place!" the railroad builder said. "I know Storm Herndon—better, perhaps, than he knows himself. He'd fight my road but he wouldn't fight me, any more than he would have fought Hank. We were his friends—Hank especially."

"I knew that." said the Kid. "But—"

"Storm Herndon knew Hank better than any man did," Whitman went on. "When we planned to send Hank's Bible to you, I told Kurt Ormond to check up with Storm Herndon before he got the package off to you. I told Kurt that if Hank had mentioned your address to any man, it was likely to have been to old Storm and—"

"Wait!" the Kid interjected. "Are you saying Kurt Ormond had Hank's Bible, that he sent it to me?"

"I wrote the letter the day of Hank's funeral," Whitman explained. "I stayed for the service but I was overdue back at division headquarters and had to leave Caprock. Kurt handled the details for me."

"I see," the Kid said slowly, and then Deadman was sprawling before them and the locomotive wheezed to a stop, its fighting freight unloading to swarm forward.

Up ahead the narrow street was clogged with men—the C.W. toughs who had been brought in by The Three to take over the town. They were pouring toward the tracks, a surly, shouting mob, and the M.P. men met the challenge by charging to meet them. Wild war cries welled above the pounding of boots as the two factions crashed together—and the battle was on.

The Kid managed to restrain six of the M.P. men and sent them hurrying away in six different directions. Then he climbed into Whitman's private coach where Storm Herndon lay silent and gray-faced but still breathing.

"Six men have gone to look for the sawbones," the Kid explained to Lana. "They all know him and he'll be here pronto."

He moved toward the door but Lana caught his arm.

"And you, Matt?" she asked.

"I've got somebody else to look for," he said. "The Three are here, Lana."

"Be careful, Matt!" she whispered. "For my sake, be careful."

He kissed her then, holding her close. It was their first kiss and the thought shadowed the Kid that it might be their last. This was August second, wasn't it? Reluctantly he pulled himself away and swung out of the car without a word.

Chaos ruled in the street stretching ahead of him, a savage confusion of fighting men milling to make a sea of waving pickhandles while guns popped here and there. The Kid shouldered into the thick of it, his left fist lashing out, his right arm arcing as he laid his gunbarrel across head after head, seeing men drop before him, seeing others take their places.

He caught a glimpse of Tyler Whitman, gray hair flying, and saw that soldierly oldster fighting hand to hand with a burly tough. And he saw Shadow Loomis lay that same tough low as the fellow pressed Whitman too hard.

It was tooth and toenail, fist and club and gun and boot. It was Hades unleashed, men slugging and wrestling along the entire length of the street. Yet the Montana-Pacific men were fighting with the greatest fury, throwing their hearts and souls as well as their bat-

tered bodies into the conflict as though this had become a personal affair, which indeed it had. The Montana-Pacific men were remembering that dynamited tunnel and the fate that would have been theirs if the blast had gone off a minute or two sooner. Montana-Pacific was out for vengeance.

A CLUB caught the Kid along the side of his head. He escaped the full force of the blow, for he saw it coming and twisted aside. But he lost his footing and went down, his head ringing, and was swept beneath a wave of flashing legs and trampling boots. He managed to get to his feet again and saw the red thatch of Key O'Dade in the press of men ahead of him and thrilled to the sight. He had feared that the telegrapher might have paid with his life for trying to get a message through to warn the end o' steel camp of the raid.

But O'Dade was here, fighting as savagely as any of the others, throwing himself into the conflict with a Celt's natural aptitude for such. There were others the Kid recognized, men he had worked with when the steel had pushed from Caprock to Lazura and Deadman and beyond. But the Kid did not see Durham or Bottsinger or the third man he sought.

He squeezed through the writhing wall of bodies and into the doorway of the Golden Slipper. The saloon was Durham's stronghold and the logical place to look for the man since Durham wasn't in the fighting. Inside the Golden Slipper, the Kid sagged against the wall, panting while he waited for his head to clear. The place was absolutely deserted.

He hadn't been in the Golden Slipper since it had moved to Deadman for Whitman's decree had barred all the M.P. men from the place. Besides the Kid had kept away from Durham when he had suspected Storm Herndon of being one of The Three. He had heard that Durham's business had suffered because of Whitman's blacklisting the saloon, and most of the percentage girls had deserted for more lucrative pleasure places. But the Kid had hardly expected to find the Golden Slipper completely empty.

Yet it was. The shelves were only half-stocked and there were plenty of empty bottles about, proof that the Central Western toughs had roistered here, fortifying themselves with liquor before they went about the devil's work they had come to do.

The roar of the fight in the street as the sound of the tumult beat through the thin walls accentuated the silence. The Kid crossed toward the bar, his boot heels thundering in the shrouding hush of the room.

When he felt unseen eyes upon himself he spun about, gun in hand, his own eyes probing every shadowy corner. For suddenly the feeling was strong upon him that he was in greater danger here than he had been in the street where death was rampant and disaster had a hundred forms. He tried to shake that feeling away, but it persisted. Yet where was the danger in this deserted place?

He approached the bar, wondering if he'd find a barkeep cowering behind the long counter. His eyes flicked to the full-length mirror behind the bar and, like that other time when he had walked into the Golden Slipper in Caprock, he saw the reflections of the oil paintings on the wall behind him, especially "The Lady of the Nile." And, unbelievably, just for a second the picture again had the semblance of life.

But this time the Kid understood—and realized his danger. Shadow Loomis had been in Hoyt Durham's office once. Shadow Loomis knew the secret of that trick picture. Loomis had spoken of it to the Kid in Caprock, warning the Kid in a way, though the Kid had failed to understand at the time.

"A pretty picture, eh?" the man had said. "She can see, friend, and she can hear. And some day she'll speak."

It had sounded idiotic at the time. But "The Lady of the Nile" was speaking now, speaking with a fiery tongue that blazed from her face. For gunflame was lashing through the picture, straight at the Gospel Kid!

He felt the burn of the bullet as it bored into his thigh, spinning him about and slamming him against the bar. His knees caved and he fell to the floor, fighting against the darkness that threatened to claim him. He lay there like a dead man.

There nad to be a room somewhere above. The Kid could see flimsy stairs in one shadowy corner, leading to the second floor. Slowly he tottered toward the stairs, wondering if his strength would sustain him until he reached them. . . .

HOYT DURHAM'S private office in Deadman's Golden Slipper was much like his office in Lazura and in Caprock had been—another ornately furnished room built below the floor level of the second story. In this latest windowless sanctuary, Durham came to his feet, letting the leather flap on the wall fall into place.

"Got him!" he announced, his swarthy face triumphant. "That idea you had of shooting through the picture made it a cinch, Curly. Matt McGrath is stretched out on the floor—dead!"

Curly Bottsinger grinned. "Reckon we'd better tote his carcass out, eh?" he suggested.

The third man shook his head. "No hurry," he argued. "There'll be plenty of dead men in this town before the sun goes down. And nobody to ask questions about them. We'll be the winners, and the winners don't have to answer to anybody."

"But what about this Loomis galoot?" Bottsinger said worriedly. "Suppose he's snooping for the Government, like you figured he might be? Suppose he reports this raid and the C.W. has to answer for it?"

The third man eased his gun from its holster, spun the cylinder calculatingly and replaced the weapon.

"We gave Loomis until the fifteenth to run or take the consequences," he remarked reflectively. "But now, with matters going as they are, we won't wait that long. No use leaving any loose ends. I didn't see Loomis around last night but he's probably still in town. Who's to say what happened if he stops a bullet during the street fighting? If there's a Government investigation on account of him, we'll claim the M.P. started the fracas when we brought men into town for our own protection. We'll say Loomis got cut down during the fight. Right now one of us had better get outside and find him."

"That'll be pretty risky," Durham observed. "Let's cut for low card to see who does the job."

He bustled about the room in search of a deck of cards, finding one in a commodious drawer of his desk after a lengthy search. Breaking the seal, he shuffled the pasteboards, his jeweled fingers winking in the lamp light as he fanned out the cards, face down, on the table top. Each man selected a card, the third man smiling as he faced his—the deuce of clubs.

"That's about the way it should be," Durham decided. "We're starting around the circle again. I burned down Matt McGrath. Curly here got Dan Callishaw. And you're the gent who pumped a bullet into Hellvation Hank. Now it's your turn again. You—"

"Reckon not," said the Gospel Kid, standing framed in the open doorway, a bloody, disheveled figure. But the gun in his hand was steady. "Raise 'em" he ordered. "Careful, Ormond! You'll never get that gun out of leather!"

XVI

KURT ORMOND stood stock-still. His lips twisted a little as he looked at the Gospel Kid.

"So now you know," he said evenly.

"Now I know you're the one who got Hank," the Kid said. "I heard Durham put the deadwood on you just as I stood outside the door. But I'm not surprised to find that you're one of The Three, Ormond, you already gave yourself away."

"I don't think so," Ormond scoffed. "The man who made a slip was Hoyt when he thought you were dead, just because you fell."

"You slipped too, Ormond," the Kid said in a deadly tone. "You slipped when you had that headboard left in my tent —with my birth date on it. I couldn't think how anybody hereabouts knew my birth date until Whitman told me you'd had Hank's Bible last fall. *My birth date was on the family record page!* Did you figure, even last fall, Ormond, that knowing my birth date might come in handy sometime?"

Ormond laughed. "January first was easy to remember. Somehow the year

stuck in my mind, too. When we made up that headboard I thought it would be more impressive with your birth date. I never guessed you'd be able to figure out where the information came from. For other gents we had Thackery Weaver's list. We borrowed his files."

"I know," said the Kid. "Was a time when I thought Weaver might be one of The Three. I know now you're Judas all right—a sneaking double-crosser who pretended to work for the Montana-Pacific when you've been on the Central Western's pay-roll all along. And you're a sight worse than the first Judas, Ormond. He was decent enough to string himself up."

"Judas?" Ormond repeated. "You mean—"

"I mean I've been looking for three gents like Goliath and Herod and Judas. Hank left that much sign for me."

Ormond's eyes widened. "Those blood smears in Hank's Bible! I saw them, too! But I thought Hank had probably pawed the pages accidentally as he was dying."

The Kid realized that Ormond was stalling for time, but within the Kid was a great weariness and a desire to be done with this business.

"One of you is as guilty as another," he said with the solemnity of a judge pronouncing sentence. "It's been a long trail, and this is the end of it. But the devil of it is that I can't shoot you like I—"

Bottsinger stared at him incredulously. "You mean you ain't goin' to gun us down?"

"Not the way you think," the Kid said. "Not the way you'd do business, you back-shooting skunks! Was a time when I wouldn't even be wastin' words on you. You can thank Hellvation Hank for the chance you're going to get. I had to study his Bible to read the sign he'd left for me and, reading that Bible, I began to see that my way was the wrong way. That's what's made the difference between the Gospel Kid and Matt McGrath of Texas. But Hank was my brother and I can't forget that, either. ' "Vengeance is mine," sayeth the Lord'. But maybe I'm to be His instrument of vengeance today. But—you don't even savvy what I'm talkin' about!'

He slipped his gun into holster.

"Get at it," he said with a vast disgust.

Just for an instant he stood there weaponless, giving them the chance they hadn't given Hank McGrath or Dan Callishaw. Then, their first astonishment passing, they were doing exactly what the Kid had known they would do—going for their guns. Hoyt Durham was the first to unlimber his six-shooter and Durham was the first to die. The Kid's hand darted downward and came up with fire blossoming from it. He shot Durham just as the dandified saloon owner was earing back the hammer of his weapon.

But that instant had given Bottsinger and Ormond time to unleather their guns. Those guns spat, driving splinters from the door jamb on either side of the Kid. The Kid leaped into the room then, feeling the burn of a bullet along his shoulder, the bite of another as it nicked the lobe of his ear. But he was firing before his feet touched the floor and Bottsinger crumpled into a corner, a bullet-hole between his shaggy brows.

The Kid landed sprawling, for the excruciating pain that welled from his wounded thigh as he struck the floor made his legs turn rubbery. A bullet zipped over his head, another burned along his ribs.

KURT ORMOND was firing with the coolness that characterized him. Propping himself upon one elbow, the Kid sighted carefully. The gun belched and Ormond wilted before him.

"You—win," Ormond managed to say and the masklike expression was gone from his inscrutable face. "You should—have been on—on our side—" He pitched face-forward, dead.

Ormond's fingers clutched at the table as he fell, fastening upon the silk tablecloth. The lamp was overturned. Instantly burning kerosene was showering everywhere, lapping across the floor toward the flimsy walls as a sheet of flame leaped across the room.

Out of that inferno the Kid dragged himself to the hallway. With the wall to support him, he groped toward the flimsy stairs, with smoke billowing down the corridor, flames roaring behind him.

The fire was spreading fast in this tinder-box building that was half tent and half structure and there were flames in the hallway before the Kid inched along to the stairs. Getting down he always remembered as a nightmare—hazy and horrible. But he made it. He reached the street just as part of the second story collapsed.

Men were still battling along the boardwalks and in the dusty road between them. But hostilities ceased temporarily as eyes turned toward the Golden Slipper where smoke billowed to hide the sky. In the sudden hush the Kid raised his voice.

"The Three are dead—inside!" he shouted. "Your paymasters won't be payin' off for C. W. tonight!"

Two or three swollen jaws sagged in surprise. A half-dozen toughs took to their heels, shouting M. P. workers hard after them. Then Tyler Whitman was beside the Kid, leading him away from the doomed saloon.

"That finishes it," the railroad builder said. "The telegraph wasn't destroyed. Those fellows just dragged O'Dade away from the key when he tried to warn us this morning. Loomis wired to Fort Yellowstone. He's a Government man and his authority was enough to impress them. Soldiers are on the way here to declare martial law but I guess we won't need them. The toughs have already begun to run out."

"Then we've won!" the Kid babbled.

"Won?" Whitman echoed and he was just as white and strained-looking as he had been when they had run that doomed tunnel.

"We've cleaned up Deadman," Whitman conceded. "But we've lost, son—lost! The Central Western will swear these toughs weren't on their pay-roll. The C.W. is far behind but they'll beat us now that the tunnel's down. It'll take weeks to clear it out and we're tied up until we do. We can't get a yard of steel out to the end of the line otherwise!"

Just for a second the Kid looked into the crestfallen face of this fighting railroad builder who had been his brother's friend, this man who had made the good fight against all the odds and who had fought on, even when defeat had seemingly already overtaken him. Then the Kid was laughing wildly, deliriously.

"A tunnel!" he shouted. "Mister, I'll hand you a tunnel all roped and saddled and ready to ride! A ready-made tunnel that can be put into shape to be a railroad tunnel in a tenth of the time it would take to clear out your tunnel. And it will be a more direct route, too. I would have told you all about it before but the M.P. tunnel was already dug and it didn't make much difference then. Besides, it was part of the story concerning Storm Herndon that I kept to myself. Ty, this tunnel's exactly what you want! Kurt Ormond must have known that when he looked over the country. But he was one of The Three, working against the M.P., not for it!"

Tyler Whitman regarded him queerly, doubt, astonishment and a great elation having their successive turns in the railroad builder's eyes.

"Things are coming a mite fast for me, boy," he said at last. "I'm hoping you're not out of your head. The doctor's busy. He's working on Storm Herndon. He says the old gent is going to pull through, too. We'd better march down there and have the doc look you over."

Whitman supported the Kid on the one side and Key O'Dade appeared to bolster Matt McGrath's faltering footsteps on the other. As they made their way toward the railroad tracks triumph walked with the Kid along the dusty street of Deadman for his work was nearly done. And if the pace was far too slow to suit his mood, it wasn't because a *doctor* was waiting in the coach.

* * * * *

ANOTHER April. The snow had come and gone again. In the upper reaches of the Big Thunders occasional white patches still lingered although the foothills had long since donned their mantles of green.

The Kid and Lana had taken all morning to climb to a promontory where they sat their saddles, looking down into the valley where twin rails glistened in the sunlight.

"I never see the railroad without remembering Dad's change of heart," she said. "And yet I always knew he was not

as bitter as he pretended to be. He only needed an excuse to make his peace with Tyler Whitman. When Whitman's train got him to the doctor in time to save his life, he had his excuse."

"Seems like a mighty long time ago," the Kid remarked gravely. "The Three are dead. Cisco Yawberry and his outfit are in prison for that dynamiting job. And the Central Western has given up. The last time I saw Ty Whitman, he told me they'd sold their Montana holdings to him for a fraction of their worth. The northern track will be a spur of the Montana-Pacific."

"You never say much about those meetings with Tyler Whitman," Lana observed pointedly.

THE Kid smiled. "He made me another offer," he admitted. "He can't get it through his head that I'd rather run a few dogies of my own than help run somebody else's railroad. But speaking of your dad, why hasn't he been to the valley lately?"

Lana laughed again. "He's practically letting the crew run the H-in-a-Hat and since he's well enough to get around again he's spending more and more time in Deadman," she said. "He and Key O'Dade have struck up quite a friendship. Dad's becoming a dyed-in-the-wool railroad man. It's terrible the way those two have contaminated each other. Number Twenty-seven was ten minutes late as usual and Dad was fuming. 'Faith and it's a fine way to be runnin' a railroad!" he said. And what do you suppose O'Dade had to say to that? 'I reckon you're plumb right,' he agreed. 'I'll pile onto the telegraph and see if I can dab a loop on that maverick!' "

The Kid joined in her laughter but his eyes were thoughtful as the sweep of his hand took in the valley with the steel stretching from east to west.

"It's finished," he said. "And it's already bringing a new day to the range. Look at how Caprock and Lazura and Deadman are building a real prosperity on the ruins of their boom-towns. There's Hellvation Hank's monument, Lana—the railroad. It makes me proud to think I had a hand in the building of it."

She looked at him long and tenderly and the laughter was gone from her.

"You think *that* is what you built that would make Hank the proudest?" she asked softly.

"What better?" he countered.

"Have you seen the latest edition of Thackery Weaver's paper? He's clamoring for folks to build a church mighty soon. He says that now that we have another fighting sky-pilot on the range, it isn't seemly for folks to be crowding into his little ranchhouse in Hidden Valley in order to hear him read from Hank McGrath's Bible. You've built a new life for yourself, Matt. I think that's the thing Hank would like."

The Kid grinned his easy grin. "Shucks, I had to make a few changes, didn't I?" he argued. "Wasn't no other way to convince your dad that his girl wasn't throwin' herself away on a worthless, wide-loopin', hell-bent gunboss!"

They were close to each other and his arms went around her. And the Gospel Kid, that tumbleweed who had at last taken roots, kissed his bride and had his kiss returned. Somewhere in the distance a locomotive's whistle wailed. The valley walls caught the mournful sound, toying with it until even the echoes finally faded into the thin silence of the high country.

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GUNSMITH'S HEADACHE

by SAM BRANT

Guns are a lot like people, opines Matt Lampton—there's always something that's a bit different about every single one of 'em!

ALL the familiar night sounds came to Matt Lampton's ears as he sat at his work-bench in the gunsmith's shop. Noises he had been hearing over and over for close on to ten years now. A horse stamping in one of the stalls down in Joe Dill's livery stable; footsteps on the plank walks that lined either side of the street, and spurs jingling; voices and an hombre laughing like he'd heard something that sure tickled him.

"Funny how a feller gets to likin' a town and sort of feels it belongs to him," Matt Lampton muttered softly, talking to himself as a man will when he's used to working alone most of the time. "Ain't a place I'd rather be than right here in Cactus Bend."

The wick of the oil lamp on the work-bench sputtered as the gunsmith lapsed into silence and placed a new trigger spring in the gun on which he was working. Lampton was a big, square-faced man with thick dark hair that was turning gray around the edges.

He looked up as someone spoke

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from the open door of the shop.

"Saw the light shinin' through the window and figured you might be here workin'. Thought I might come in and set awhile."

Lampton nodded as he glanced at the man in the doorway, but the gunsmith's eyes were wary. He knew most folks in the little cowtown well and had found them neighborly, but this Joe Russell was a comparative stranger. Lampton had seen him around town a lot during the last couple of weeks, but up to now Russell had seemed intent on minding his own business.

Russell stepped into the shop, a tall, thin man who walked with catlike steps. His boots were expensive but they had seen a lot of wear. His levis and shirt were neat and clean. But it was on the gun in his holster that Lampton's gaze centered. Sometimes you could tell a lot about a man by the gun he wore—at least Matt Lampton always figured so.

The cedar butt of that double action Colt. 45 was worn slick, as if the gun had seen considerable use. The holster hung so that when Russell's right arm hung straight down the butt of the Colt was in easy reach of his fingers. Could be a gunslick, Lampton decided, but it wasn't always easy to be sure about a man.

"Reckon you must get tired workin' on guns," Russell remarked as he seated himself on an upturned wooden box near the work bench. "Takin' 'em apart and puttin' them together again could get monotonous."

"I never found it so." Lampton tried the trigger of the gun he was repairing and found the new spring worked fine. "Guns are a lot like people. There's something different about every one of them."

THE gunsmith stopped working and swung around on his stool to face his visitor. He stared thoughtfully at the tiny little holes in Russell's shirt just over the thin man's heart.

"You didn't come here just to pass the time away," Lampton said, as he picked up an old briar pipe and a tobacco pouch from the bench. "Figure you must have some reason for not wearin' your badge while you're in town."

"What makes you think I wear a badge?" demanded Joe Russell, looking at Lampton as if he had misjudged the gunsmith first off. "You just guessing?"

"Observing," Lampton said dryly. "Those pin-holes in your shirt gave me the idea you might be a lawman. The sheriff we've got in Cactus Bend tends his job fairly well. There's been a couple of hombres knocked over the head and robbed lately, but this town ain't what you'd really call wild."

"Not yet, it ain't," said Russell. "But it might be." His smile was somewhat grim. "That's why I'm here. You called it correct about the badge, Lampton. U. S. Deputy Marshal. I'm after—"

A boot scraped in the darkness beyond the open door. A knife gleamed in the light as it sped through the air. It made a strange little sound as it plunged into Russell's chest. He rose from the box clawing at the knife, his eyes rolling. His knees buckled and he went down—a thin, still figure on the wooden floor of the shop.

Matt Lampton reached for his gun, remembered he wasn't wearing his cartridge belt and holster as he worked. The guns on the work bench were all empty. He leaned over and blew out the lamps. Darkness hid him as it did the dead man lying there at his feet.

The gunsmith stood listening. From outside came the sound of footsteps. Someone running away quietly, but swiftly. Lampton was sure that Russell's killer was gone.

"Insultin', I call it," muttered Lampton. "Killin' a man with a knife in a gunsmith's shop!"

He went to the door and peered out into the street. Down at the saloon three riders from one of the spreads were swinging out of their saddles. The moon looked very pretty hanging there close to the peak of old Bald Top. Lampton sighed as he got to thinking what the deputy marshal had said about Cactus Bend becoming a wild town. The gunsmith didn't figure he would like that. Not any.

Lampton went back into the shop. He struck a match and held it to the wick of the lamp. The dead man looked lonely in the yellow light. Lampton knelt and made sure that Russell wasn't breathing. The marshal had cashed in his chips, all right.

There were voices and footsteps out on the board walk. Sheriff Dan Clark loomed big in the doorway. A fast-moving fat man when he wanted to be. He looked at the body and then at Lampton. There were other men behind him.

"Was told you might need me, Matt," the sheriff said. "Feller passed the shop and figured there was trouble. That looks like that feller Joe Russell lyin' there."

"It's Russell, all right," Lampton said. "Somebody got him with a throwin' knife. He's dead."

Sheriff Clark stepped into the shop, with other men crowding in after him. Four of them there were men Matt Lampton knew well. They were all looking at the body and not paying him much mind. The sheriff turned the corpse over. There hadn't been much bleeding. Joe Russell still looked surprised and hurt.

"You see who did it, Matt?" Clark asked as he stood up.

"No," Lampton shook his head. "Someone stood just outside the open door. I wasn't wearin' a gun. I blew out the light to keep him from gettin' me, too. Russell aimed to tell me somethin' when he was killed."

"You boys take the body down to the undertaker," the sheriff ordered. "Tell Ben Dale I'll be along to talk to him shortly."

The four men picked up the corpse and moved out of the shop. They were talking quietly among themselves as men will when something is puzzling them. The sheriff sighed and seated himself on a box. He thought best, sitting down.

Matt Lampton walked over and took down the gun-belt hanging on a peg in the wall. He buckled the belt around his waist so that the holster hung down against his right thigh. He wasn't rightly what could be called a fighting man but he'd never been one to shirk trouble. The weight of the .45 in the holster was comforting.

"I ain't goin' to insult you by sayin' you could have killed the marshal with the knife, Matt," the sheriff remarked. "Still there's some folks that might think so."

"No cause for me doin' it." Lampton frowned. "Russell was a stranger to me. I never said more than 'Howdy' to him until he came here tonight. But he must have had a reason for comin' to see me. You figure what it could be, Dan?"

"Maybe he aimed to have his gun repaired," said the sheriff. "Might not have been workin' just right. What did Russell tell you?"

LAMPTON told how he suspected Russell was a lawman, because of the pinholes in the dead man's shirt. It was characteristic of the gunsmith to keep working as he talked. He was putting the gun with the new trigger spring back together, and staying busy as a man will who likes his job.

"So I told him about there bein' a couple of hombres knocked over the head and robbed lately, but said the town wasn't what you'd call really wild," said Lampton. "Russell said, 'Not yet, it ain't, but it will be. That's why I'm here. I'm after—' " Before he could finish somebody got him with the knife."

Both men stopped talking as they heard heavy footsteps on the plank walk outside the shop. A moment later a big man appeared in the doorway. He was Jed March, who had bought the Eagle Saloon just a few weeks back. March looked a heap more like a rancher in the way he dressed and acted than he did a saloon-keeper. The holster on his right hip was empty.

"My gun ready, Matt?" he asked. "I feel right unprotected without it. Heard about the marshal being killed, and what with a couple of rich cattlemen like John Wadely and Denver Harvey being knocked out and robbed here in town, I aim to go armed."

"Just finished workin' on the gun, March," Lampton said, handing the saloon owner the Colt with the new trigger spring. "Reckon you'll find it's all right now."

"Good." March took the gun, loaded it, and thrust it into his holster. "What do I owe you, Matt?"

"Reckon a dollar will cover it."

Lampton got to thinking that he never had liked Jed March much. Besides, there had been too many hard cases hanging around the saloon since the new owner had taken over the Eagle.

"Be a little careful in usin' that gun till you get it worked in," he advised. "That trigger spring might be a mite fast."

"I'll watch it."

March handed the gunsmith a silver dollar. Then the saloon owner glanced at the sheriff.

"Why, I didn't see you sittin' there, Sheriff," he said in a surprised tone. "Thought it was a tub of lard."

Jed March laughed at his own joke as he left the gunsmith's shop. Sheriff Clark was scowling. Most times the lawman didn't mind jokes about his being fat, but it was evident he didn't care for March making fun of him.

"I'm sure glad you recognized the hombre who threw that knife, Matt," the sheriff said, his eyes fixed on the shadows beyond the open door of the shop. "I'll place him under arrest as soon as I get around to it."

Matt Lampton looked at the sheriff in amazement. The gunsmith hadn't said a thing about recognizing the man who had thrown the knife and killed Russell. But Clark usually knew what he was doing, so Lampton didn't deny the sheriff's statement.

The gunsmith looked closely at the silver dollar that March had given him. He grunted, and looked again. The initials "D. H." had been cut into the coin in tiny letters.

"Why this is Denver Harvey's pocket piece," Lampton said. "He always carried this silver dollar and never spent it. You know, the feller that hit Harvey and Wadely sure struck hard. Both them men died from the blows."

"I know," said the sheriff, as he got to his feet. "I got something to tend to now. I'll see you later, Matt."

Sheriff Clark left the shop. The street grew quiet. Lampton got to hearing the same sounds he had been hearing every other night—the noises that were part of the little cowtown.

Before long the gunsmith decided that he had worked enough for one evening. Besides, he had had a busy day and he was tired. He closed the window, blew out the lamp, and picked up his hat. He hesitated, then went back and got something off the work-bench, placed it inside his hat, then put the Stetson on again.

He stepped outside and turned to fasten the padlock on the door. At the instant a figure lunged at him out of the shadows. Lampton caught a glimpse of a hand holding a Colt by the barrel as the butt was brought down on the gunsmith's head.

The blow stunned Lampton, even though his head was protected by his hat and what he had placed inside it. He heard a gun roar and the man who had attacked him staggered and cursed.

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JUST OUT—25c AT ALL STANDS!

Lampton's hat fell off. As the gunsmith grabbed his attacker by the shirt front, ready to give him a good sock in the jaw, Clark came running down the street. The sheriff was moving fast for a fat man. Other citizens of the town followed closely behind the sheriff and gathered around.

Lampton felt blood on his hand, realized the man he held was wounded and quickly released his foe. His attacker dropped to the plank walk.

"Didn't figure he'd try to get you so fast," said the sheriff. "Thought I might bring him out into the open by making out you knew who killed the marshal. And I was right."

He knelt beside the wounded man. Jed March's face was clearly revealed in the moonlight. The saloon owner had been shot in the chest.

"Always did say it was dangerous to hit a man over the head with the butt of a gun," Lampton said dryly. "The gun might go off and wound the feller that's holdin' it—just like March's gun just did. I told him the trigger worked mighty easy."

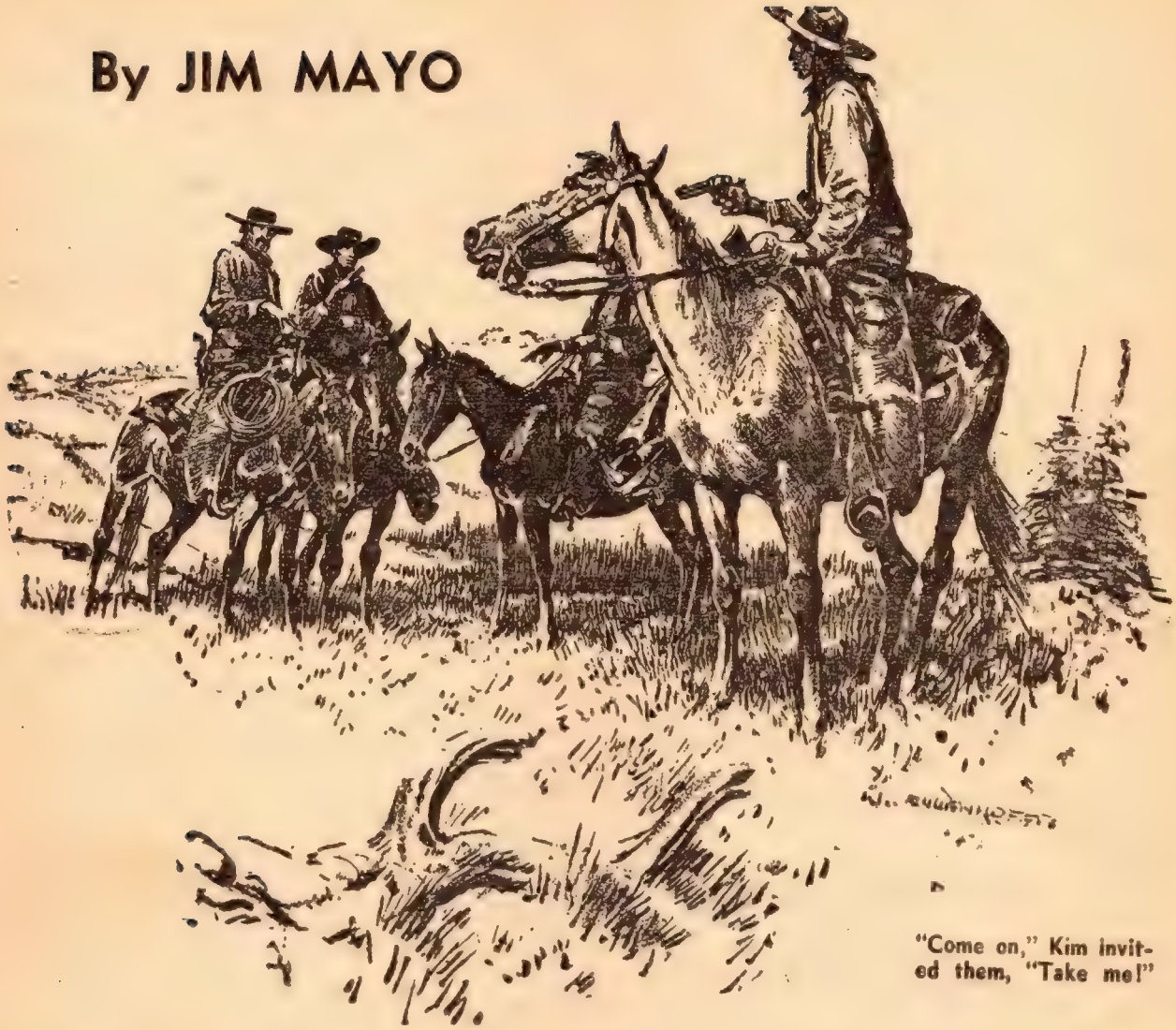
"I'm cashin' in," moaned March. "Planned to take Cactus Bend over gradually, make it a place where outlaws could hide out. The marshal knew. I had to kill him." He shuddered and died.

"I started suspectin' March when he said he'd heard about the marshal being killed," Lampton remarked. "Didn't anybody but the killer know Russell was a marshal till I got the lawman to admit it to me."

"I noticed that," the sheriff said.

"When you said I knew the killer I figured I'd better play along with you, Sheriff." Matt Lampton frowned as he stared down at the dead man. "Soon as he gave me his gun to repair I knew I didn't like him. He didn't even keep the gun clean." The gunsmith picked up his hat and took out the rolled up leather apron he had placed inside to protect his head. "Besides he gave me a headache."

By JIM MAYO



"Come on," Kim invited them, "Take me!"

Grub Line Rider

Kim Sartain's handy with guns—and can't be bluffed!

THERE was good grass in these high meadows, Kim Sartain reflected, and it was a wonder they were not in use. Down below in the flat land the cattle looked scrawny and half starved. He had come up a narrow, little used trail from the level country and was heading across the divide when he ran into the series of green, tree bordered meadows scattered among the ridges.

Wind rippled the grass in long waves across the meadow and the sun lay upon it like a caress. Across the meadow and among the trees he heard a vague sound of falling water, and turned the zebra dun toward it. As he did so, three horsemen rode out of the trees, drawing up sharply when they saw him.

He rode on, walking the dun, and the three wheeled their mounts and came toward him at a canter. A tall man rode a gray horse in the van. The other two were obviously cowhands, and all wore guns. The tall man had a lean, hard face with a knife scar across the cheek.

"You there!" he roared, reining in. "What you doin' ridin' here?"

Kim Sartain drew up, his lithe, trail hardened body easy in the saddle. "Why, I'm ridin' through," he said quietly, "and in no particular hurry. You got this country fenced against travel?"

"Well, it ain't no trail!" The big man's eyes were gray and hostile. "You just turn around and ride back the way you come! The trail goes around through Ryerson."

"That's twenty miles out of my way," Kim objected, "and this here's a nice ride. I reckon I'll keep on the way I'm goin'."

The man's eyes hardened. "Did Monaghan put you up to this?" he demanded. "Well, if he did, it's time he was taught a lesson! We'll send you back to him fixed up proper! *Take him, boys!*"

The men started, then froze. The six-shooter in Kim's hand wasn't an hallucination. "Come on," Kim invited mildly. "Take me!"

The men swallowed, and stood still. The tall man's face grew red with fury. "So? A gun-slinger, is it? Two can play at that game! I'll have Clay Tanner out here before the day is over!"

Kim Sartain felt his pulse jump. Clay Tanner? Why, the man was an outlaw, a vicious killer, wanted in a dozen places! "Listen, Big Eye," he said harshly, "I don't know you and I never heard of Monaghan, but if he dislikes you, that's one credit for him. Anybody who would hire or have anything to do with the likes of Clay Tanner is a coyote!"

THE man's face purpled and his eyes turned mean. "I'll tell Clay that!" he blustered. "He'll be mighty glad to hear it! That will be all he needs to come after you!"

Sartain calmly returned his gun to its holster, keeping his eyes on the men before him without hiding his contempt. "If you hombres feel lucky," he said, "try and drag iron. I'd as soon blast you out of your saddles as not.

"As for you," Kim's eyes turned on the tall man, "you'd best learn now as later how to treat strangers. This country ain't fenced, and from the look of it, ain't used. You've no right to keep anybody out of here, and when I want to ride through, I'll ride through! Get me?"

One of the hands broke in, his voice edged. "Stranger, after talkin' that way to Jim Targ, you'd better light a shuck out of this country! He *runs* it!"

Kim shoved his hat back on his head and looked from the cowhand to his boss. He was a quiet mannered young drifter who liked few things better than a fight. Never deliberately picking trouble, he nevertheless had a reckless liking for it, and never sidestepped any that came his way.

"He don't run me," he commented cheerfully, "and personal, I think he's a mighty small pebble in a mighty big box! He rattles a lot, but for a man who runs this country, he fits mighty loose!"

Taking out his tobacco, he calmly began to roll a smoke, his half smile daring the men to draw. "Just what," he asked, "gave you the idea you did run this country? And just who is this Monaghan?"

Targ's eyes narrowed. "You know durned well who he is!" he declared angrily. "He's nothin' but a two by twice would-be cattleman who's hornin' in on my range!"

"Such as this?" Kim waved a hand around him. "I'd say there ain't been a critter on this in months! What are you tryin' to do? Claim all the grass in the country?"

"It's my grass!" Targ declared beligerently. "Mine! Just because I ain't built a trail into it yet is no reason why . . ."

"So that's it!" Sartain studied them thoughtfully. "All right, Targ, you an' your boys turn around and head right out of here. I think I'll homestead this piece!"

"You'll *what?*" Targ bellowed. Then he cursed bitterly.

"Careful, Beetle Puss!" Kim warned,

grinning. "Don't make me pull your ears!"

With another foul name, Targ's hand flashed for his gun, but no more had his fist grabbed the butt than he was looking into the muzzle of Kim's six-shooter.

"I'm not *anxious* to kill you, Targ, so don't force it on me," he said quietly. The cattleman's face was gray, realizing his narrow escape. Slowly, yet reluctantly, his hand left his gun.

"This ain't over!" Targ declared harshly. "You ride out of here, or we'll ride you out!"

As the three drifted away, Kim watched them go, then shrugged. "What the devil, Pard," he said to the dun, "we weren't really goin' no place particular. Let's have a look around and then go see this Monaghan."

While the sun was hiding its face behind the western pines, Kim Sartain cantered the dun down into the cuplike valley that held the ranch buildings of the Y7. They were solidly built buildings, and everything looked sharp and clean. It was no rawhide outfit, this one of Tom Monaghan's. And there was nothing rawhide about the slim, attractive girl with red hair who came out of the ranchhouse and shaded her eyes at him.

He drew rein and shoved his hat back. "Ma'am," he said, "I rode in here huntin' Tom Monaghan, but I reckon I was huntin' the wrong person. You'd likely be the boss of any spread you're on. I always notice," he added, "that red headed women are apt to be bossy!"

"And I notice," she said sharply, "that drifting, no good cowhands are apt to be smart! Too smart! Before you ask any questions, we don't need any hands! Not even top hands, if you call yourself that!

"If you're ridin' the grubline, just sit around until you here grub call, then light in. We'd feed anybody, stray dogs or no account saddle bums not barred!"

Kim grinned at her. "All right, Rusty. I'll stick around for chuck. Meanwhile, we'd better round up Tom Monaghan, because I want to make him a little deal on some cattle."

"You? Buy cattle?" Her voice was scornful. "You're just a big talking drifter!" Her eyes flashed at him, but he noticed there was lively curiosity in her blue eyes.

"Goin' to need some cows," he said, curling a leg around the saddle horn. "Aim to homestead up there in the high meadows."

The girl had started to turn away, now she stopped and her eyes went wide. "You aim to *what?*"

NEITHER had noticed the man with iron gray hair who had stopped at the corner of the house. His eyes were riveted on Sartain. "Yes," he said, "repeat that again, will you? You plan to homestead up in the mountains?"

"Uh-huh, I sure do." Kim Sartain looked over at Tom Monaghan and liked what he saw. "I've got just sixty dollars in money, a good horse, a rope, and a will. I aim to get three hundred head of cows from you and a couple of horses, two pack mules, and some grub."

Rusty opened her mouth to explode, but Tom held up his hand. "And just how, young man, do you propose to pay for all that with sixty dollars?"

Kim smiled. "Why, Mr. Monaghan, I figure I can fatten my stock right fast on that upland grass, sell off enough to pay interest and a down payment on the principal. Next year I could do better. Of course," he added, "six hundred head of stock would let me make out faster, and that grass up there would handle them, plumb easy. Better, too," he added, "if I had somebody to cook for me, and mend my socks. How's about it, Rusty?"

"Why, you insufferable, egotistical upstart!"

"From what you say, I'd guess you've been up there in the meadows," Monaghan said thoughtfully, "but did you see anyone there?"

"Uh-huh. Three hombres was wastin' around. One of them had a scar on his face. I think they called him Jim Targ."

SARTAIN was enjoying himself now. He had seen the girl's eyes widen at the mention of the men, and especially of Jim Targ. He kept his dark face inscrutable.

"They didn't say anything to you?" Monaghan was unbelieving. "Nothing at all?"

"Oh, yeah! This here Targ, he seemed right put out at my ridin' through the country. Ordered me to go around by Ryerson. Right about then I started lookin' that grass over, and sort of made up my mind to stay. He seemed to think you'd sent me up there."

"Did you tell him you planned to homestead?"

"Oh, sure! He didn't seem to cotton to the idea very much. Mentioned some hombre named Clay Tanner who would run me off."

"Tanner is a dangerous killer," Monaghan told him grimly.

"Oh, he is? Well, now! *Tsk, tsk, tsk!* This Targ's sort of cuttin' a wide swath, ain't he?"

The boarding house triangle opened up suddenly with a deafening clangor, and Kim Sartain, suddenly aware that he had not eaten since breakfast, and little of that, slid off his horse. Without waiting for further comment, he led the dun toward the corral and began stripping the saddle.

"Dad," Rusty moved toward her father, "is he crazy or are we? Do you suppose he really saw Targ?"

Tom Monaghan stared at Sartain thoughtfully, noting the two low slung guns, the careless, easy swing of Kim's stride. "Rusty, I don't think he's crazy, I think maybe Targ is. I'm going to let him have the cows!"

"Father!" She was aghast. "You wouldn't! Not three hundred!"

"Six hundred," he corrected. "Six hundred can be made to pay. And I think it will be worth it to see what happens. I've an idea more happened up there today than we have heard. I think that somebody tried to walk on this man's toes, and he probably happens to have corns on every one of them!"

When their meal was finished, Monaghan looked over at Kim, who had little to say during the supper. "How soon would you want that six hundred head?" He paused. "Next week?"

The four cowhands looked up, startled, but Kim failed to turn a hair. "Tomorrow at daylight," Kim said coolly. "I want the nearest cattle you have to the home ranch, and the help of your boys. I'm goin' to push cattle on that grass before noon!"

Tom Monaghan's eyes twinkled. "You're sudden, young fellow, plumb sudden. You know Targ's riders will be up there, don't you? He won't take this."

"Targ's riders," Sartain said quietly, "will get there about noon or after. I aim to be there first. Incidentally," he said, "I'll want some tools to throw together a cabin—a good strong one. I plan to build just west of the water," he added.

He turned suddenly toward Rusty, who had also been very quiet. As if she knew he intended speaking to her, she looked up. Her boy's shirt was open at the neck, and he could see the swell of her bosom under the rough material.

"Thought about that cookin' job yet?" he asked. "I sure am fed up on my own cookin'. Why, I'd even marry a cook to get her up there!"

A round faced cowhand choked suddenly on a big mouthful of food and had to leave the table. The others were grinning at their plates. Rusty Monaghan's face went pale, then crimson. "Are you," she said coolly, "offering me a job, or proposing?"

"Let's make it a job first," Kim said gravely, "I ain't had none of your cookin' yet! If you pass the exams, then we can get down to more serious matters."

Rusty's face was white to the lips. "If you think I'd cook for or marry such a pig-headed windbag as you are, you're wrong! What makes you think I'd marry any broken down, drifting saddle tramp that comes in here? Who do you think you are, anyway?"

Kim got up. "The name, ma'am, is

Kim Sartain. As to who I am, I'm the hombre you're goin' to cook for. I'll be leavin' early tomorrow, but I'll drop back the next day, so you fix me an apple pie. I like lots of fruit, real thick pie, and plenty of juice."

Coolly, he strolled outside and walked toward the corral, whistling. Tom Monaghan looked at his daughter, smiling, and the hands finished their supper quickly and hurried outside.

IT WAS daybreak, with the air still crisp when Rusty opened her eyes suddenly to hear the lowing of cattle, and the shrill Texas yells of the hands, driving cattle. Hurriedly, she dressed and stopped on the porch to see the drive lining out for the mountains. Far ahead, her eyes could just pick out a lone horseman, headed toward Gunsight Pass and the mountain meadows.

Her father came in an hour later, his face serious. He glanced at her quickly. "That boy's got nerve!" he said. "Furthermore, he's a hand!"

"But Dad," she protested, "they'll kill him! He's just a boy, and that Tanner is vicious! I've heard about him!"

Monaghan nodded. "I know, but Baldy tells me this Sartain was *segundo* for Ward McQueen, of the Tumbling K when they had that run-in with rustlers a few months back. According to Baldy, Sartain is hell on wheels with a gun!"

She was worried despite herself. "Dad, what do you think?"

He smiled. "Why, honey, if that man is all I think he is, Targ had better light a shuck for Texas, and as for you, you'd better start bakin' that apple pie!"

"Father!" Rusty protested. But her eyes widened a little, and she stepped further onto the porch, staring after the distant rider.

Kim Sartain was a rider without illusions. Born and bred in the West, he knew to what extent such a man as Jim Targ could and would go. He knew that with tough, gun-handy riders, he would ordinarily be able to hold all the range he wanted, and that high meadow range was good enough to fight for.

Sartain knew he was asking for trouble, yet there was something in him that resented being pushed around. He had breathed the free air of a free country too long, and had the average American's fierce resentment of tyranny. Targ's high handed manner had got his back up, and his decision had not been a passing fancy. He knew just what he was doing, but no matter what the future held, he was determined to move in on this range and to hold it and fight for it if need be.

There was no time to waste. Targ might take him lightly, and think his declaration had been merely the loud talk of a disgruntled cowhand, but on the other side, the rancher might take him seriously and come riding for trouble. The cattle could come in their own good time, but he intended to be on the ground, and quickly.

The dun was feeling good and Kim let him stretch out in a fast canter. It was no time at all until he was riding up to the pool by the waterfall. He gave a sigh of relief, for he was the first man on the ground.

He jumped down, took a hasty drink, and let the dun drink. Meanwhile he picked the bench for his cabin, and put down the ax he had brought with him. Baldy had told him there was a saddle trail that came up the opposite side of the mountain and skirted among the cliffs to end near this pool. Leaving the horse, Kim walked toward it.

Yet before he had gone more than three steps, he heard a quick step behind him. He started to turn, but a slashing blow with a six-gun barrel clipped him on the skull. He staggered and started to fall, glimpsed the hazy outlines of his attacker, and struck out. The blow landed solidly, and then something clipped him again and he fell over into the grass. The earth crumbled beneath him and he tumbled, over and over, hitting a thick clump of greasewood growing out of the cliff, then hanging up in some manzanita.

The sound of crashing in the brush below him was the first thing he remembered. He was aware that he must have had his eyes open and been half conscious for some time. His head throbbed abominably and when he tried to move his leg it seemed stiff and clumsy. He lay still, recalling what had happened.

He remembered the blows he had taken, and then falling. Below him he heard more thrashing in the brush. Then a voice called, "Must have crawled off, Tanner. He's not down here!"

Somebody swore, and aware of his predicament Kim held himself rigid, waiting for them to go away. Obviously, he was suspended in the clump of manzanita somewhere on the side of the cliff. Above him, he heard the lowing of cattle. The herd had arrived then. What of the boys with it?

It was a long time before the searchers finally went away and he could move. When he could, he got a firm grip on the root of the manzanita and then turned himself easily. His leg was bloody, but seemed unbroken. It was tangled in the brush, however, and his pants were torn. Carefully, he felt for his guns. One of them remained in its holster. The other was gone.

WORKING with infinite care and as quietly as possible, he lowered himself down the steep face of the rocky bluff, using brush and projections until finally he was standing upright on the ground below. A few minutes search beneath where he had hung in the brush disclosed his other pistol, hanging in the top of a mountain mahogany.

Checking his guns, he limped slowly down into the brush. Here weakness suddenly overcame him and he slumped to a sitting position. He had hurt his leg badly, and his head was swimming.

He squinted his eyes, squeezing them shut and opening them, trying to clear his brain. The hammering in his skull continued and he sat very still, his head bulging with pain, his eyes watching a tiny lizard darting among the stones. How long he sat there he did not know, but when he got started moving again, he noticed that the sun was well past the zenith.

Obviously, he had been unconscious for some time in the brush, and had lost more time now. Limping, but moving carefully, he wormed his way along the gully into which he had fallen, and slowly managed to mount the steep, tree covered face of the bluff beyond where he had fallen.

Then, lowering himself to the ground he rested for a few minutes, then dragged himself on. He needed water, and badly. Most of all, he had to know what had happened. Apparently, Targ was still in command of the situation. The herd had come through, but Monaghan's riders must have been driven off. Undoubtedly Targ had the most men. Bitterly, he thought of his boasts to Rusty, and what they had amounted to. He had walked into a trap like any child.

It took him almost an hour of moving and resting to get near the falls. Watching his chance, he slid down to the water and got a drink, and then, crouching in the brush, he examined his leg. As he had suspected, no bones were broken, but the flesh was badly lacerated from falling into the branches, and he must have lost a good deal of blood. Carefully, he bathed the wound in the cold water from the pool, then bound it up as well as he could by tearing his shirt and using his handkerchief.

When he had finished he crawled into the brush and lay there like a wounded animal, his eyes closed, his body heavy with the pulsing of pain in his leg and the dull ache in his skull.

Somehow, he slept, and when he awakened he smelled smoke. Lifting his head, he stared around into the darkness. Night had fallen, and there was a heavy bank of clouds overhead, but beyond the pool was the brightness of a fire. Squinting his eyes, he could see several moving figures, and no one sitting down. The pool at this point was no more than twenty feet across, and he could hear

their voices clearly and distinctly.

"Might as well clean 'em up now, Targ," somebody was saying in a heavy voice. "He pushed these cattle in here, an' it looks like he was trying to make an issue of it. Let's go down there tonight."

"Not tonight, Tanner." Targ's voice was slower, lighter. "I want to be sure. When we hit them, we've got to wipe them out, leave nobody to make any complaint or push the case. It will be simple enough for us to tell our story and make it stick if they don't have anybody on their side."

"Who rightly owns this range?" Tanner asked.

Targ shrugged. "Anybody who can hold it. Monaghan wanted it, and I told everybody to lay off. Told them how much I wanted and what would happen if they tried to move in. They said I'd no right to hold range I wasn't usin', an' I told them to start something an' I'd show 'em my rights with a gun. I like this country, and I mean to hold it. I'll get the cattle later. If any of these piddlin' little ranchers want trouble, I'll give it to 'em."

"Might as well keep these cows, and get the rest of what that Irishman's got," Tanner said. "We've got the guns. If they are wiped out, we can always say they started it, and who's to say we're wrong?"

"Sure. My idea exactly," Targ agreed. "I want that Monaghan's ranch, anyway." He laughed. "And that ain't all he's got that I want!"

"Why not tonight? He's only got four hands, and one of them is bad hurt or dead. At least one more is wounded a mite."

"Uh-uh. I want that Sartain first. He's around somewhere, you can bet on that! He's hurt and hurt bad, but we didn't find him at the foot of that cliff, so he must have got away somehow! I want to pin his ears back, good!"

Kim eased himself deeper into the brush and tried to think his way out.

[*Turn page*]

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His rifle was on his horse, and what had become of the dun he did not know. Obviously, the Monaghan riders had returned to the Y7, but it was he who had led Tom Monaghan into this fight, and it was up to him to get him out. But how?

The zebra dun, he knew, was no easy horse for a stranger to lay hands on. The chances were that the horse was somewhere out on the meadow, and his rifle with him. Across near the fire there were at least six men, and no doubt another one or two would be watching the trail down to the Y7.

It began to look as if he had taken a bigger bite than he could handle. Maybe Rusty was right after all, and he was just a loud talking drifting saddle bum who could get into trouble but not out of it. The thought stirred him to action. He eased back away from the edge of the pool, taking his time and moving soundlessly. Whatever was done must be done soon.

The situation was simple enough. Obviously, Monaghan and some of the small flatland ranchers needed this upper range, but Targ, while not using it himself, was keeping them off. Now he obviously intended to do more. Kim Sartain had started something that seemed about to destroy the people he called his friends. And the girl too.

He swallowed that one. Maybe he wasn't the type for double harness, but if he was, Rusty Monaghan was the girl. And why shouldn't he be? Ward McQueen had been the same sort of hombre as himself, and Ward was marrying his boss—as pretty a girl as ever owned a ranch.

While he had decided to homestead this place simply because of Targ's high-handed manner, he could see that it was an excellent piece of range. From talk at the Y7 he knew there were more of these mountain meadows, and some of the other ranchers from below could move their stock up. His sudden decision, while based on pure deviltry, was actually a splendid idea.

His cattle were on the range, even if they still wore Monaghan's brand. That was tantamount to possession if he could make it stick, and Kim Sartain was not a man given to backing down when his bluff was called. The camp across the pool was growing quiet, for one after another of the men was turning in. A heavy bodied, bearded man sat near the fire, half dozing. He was the one man on guard.

Quietly, Kim began to inch around the pool, and by the time an hour had passed and the riders were snoring loudly, he had completed the circuit to a point where he was almost within arm's length of the nearest sleeper. En route he had acquired something else—a long forked stick.

With infinite care, he reached out and lifted the belt and holster of the nearest rider, then, using the stick, retrieved those of the man beyond. Working his way around the camp, he succeeded in getting all the guns but those of the watcher, and those of Clyde Tanner. These last he deliberately left behind. Twice, he had to lift guns from under the edges of blankets, but only once did a man stir and look around, but as all was quiet and he could see the guard by the fire, the man returned to his sleep.

Now, Kim got to his feet. His bad leg was stiff, and he had to shift it with care, but he moved to a point opposite the guard. Now came the risky part, and the necessity for taking chances. His Colt level at the guard, he tossed a pebble against the man's chest. The fellow stirred, but did not look up. The next one caught him on the neck, and the guard looked up to see Kim Sartain, a finger across his lips for silence, the six-shooter to lend authority.

The guard gulped loudly, then his lips slackened and his eyes bulged. The heavy cheeks looked sick and flabby. With a motion of the gun, Kim indicated the man was to rise. Clumsily, the fellow got to his feet and at Sar-

[*Turn page*]

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tain's gesture, approached him. Then he turned the man around, and was about to tie his hands when the fellow's wits seemed to return. With more courage than wisdom, he suddenly bellowed, *"Targ! Tanner! It's him!"*

Kim Sartain's pistol barrel clipped him a ringing blow on the skull, and the big guard went down in a heap. Looking across his body, Kim Sartain stood with both hands filled with lead pushers. "You boys sit right still," he said smiling, "I don't aim to kill anybody unless I have to. Now all of you but Tanner get up and move to the left."

HE WATCHED them with cat's eyes as they moved, alert for any wrong move. When they were lined up opposite him, all either bare footed or in sock feet, he motioned to Tanner. "You get up, Clyde. Now belt on your guns, but careful! Real careful!"

The gunman got shakily to his feet, his eyes murderous. He had been awakened from a sound sleep to look into Sartain's guns and see the hard blaze of the eyes beyond them. Nor did it pass unnoticed that all the guns had been taken but his, and his eyes narrowed, liking that implication not a bit.

"Targ," Kim said coldly, "you and your boys listen to me! I was ridin' through this country a perfect stranger until you tried to get mean! I don't like to have nobody ridin' me, see? So I went to see Monaghan, whom I'd never heard about until you mentioned him. I made a deal for cows, and I'm in these meadows to stay. You bit off more than you could chew.

"Moreover, you brought this yellow-streaked, coyote-killin' Tanner in here to do your gun-slinging for you. I hear he's right good at it! And I hear he was huntin' me!

"The rest of you boys are mostly cowhands. You know the right and wrong of this as well as I do! Well, right here and now we're goin' to settle my claim on this land! I left Tanner his guns after takin' all yours because I figured he really wanted me. Now he'll get his chance, afterwards if any of the the rest of you want me, you can buy in, one at a time! When the shootin's over here tonight, the fight's over."

His eyes riveted on Targ. "You hear that, Jim Targ? Tanner gets his chance, then you do if you want it. But you make no trouble for Tom Monaghan, and no trouble for me. You're just a little man in a big country, you can keep your spread and run it small, or you can leave the country!"

As he finished speaking, he turned back to Tanner. "Now, you killer for pay, you've got your guns. I'm going to holster mine." His eyes swung to the waiting cowhands. "You," he indicated an oldish man with cold blue eyes and drooping gray mustaches, "give the word!"

With a flick of his hand, his gun dropped into its holster and his hands to their sides. Jim Targ's eyes narrowed, but his cowhands were all attention. Kim Sartain knew his Western men. Even outlaws like a man with nerve, and would see him get a break.

"Now!" The gray mustached man yelled. "Go for 'em!"

Tanner spread his hands wide. "No! No!" he screamed the words. "Don't shoot!"

Unused to meeting men face to face with an even break, the very fact that Sartain had left his guns for him, a taunt and a dare as well as an indication of Sartain's confidence, had wrecked what nerve the killer had.

Now he stepped back, his face gray. With death imminent, all the courage went out of him. "I ain't got no grudge agin you!" he protested. "It was that Targ! He set me on to you!"

The man who had given the signal exploded with anger. "Well, of all the yellow, two-bit, four-flushin' windbags!" His words failed him. "And you're supposed to be tough!" he said contemptuously.

Targ stared at Tanner, then shifted his eyes to Sartain. "That was a good

play!" he said. "But I made no promises! Just because that coyote has yellow down his spine is no reason I forfeit this range!"

"I said," Sartain commented calmly, "the fighting ends here." Stooping, he picked up one of the gun belts and tossed it to Targ's feet. "There's your chance, if you want a quick slide into the grave!"

Targ's face worked with fury. He had plenty of courage but he was remembering that lightning draw of the day before, and knew he could never match it, not even approach it. "I'm no gunfighter!" he said furiously. "But I won't quit! This here range belongs to me!"

"My cattle are on it," Kim said coolly, "I hold it. You set foot on it even once in the next year and I'll hunt you down wherever you are and shoot you like a dog!"

Jim Targ was a study in anger and futility. His big hands open and closed, and he muttered an oath. Whatever he was about to say was cut off short, for the gray mustached hand yelled suddenly. "Look *out!*"

KIM wheeled, crouched and drawing as he turned. Tanner, his enemy's attention distracted, took the chance he was afraid to take with Sartain's eyes upon him. His gun was out and lifting, but Kim's speed was as the dart of a snake's head, a blur of motion, then a stab of red flame. Tanner's shot plowed dust at his feet. Then the killer wilted at the knees, turned halfway around and fell into the dust beside the fire.

Sartain's gun swung back, but Targ had not moved, nor had the others. For an instant, the tableau held, and then Kim Sartain holstered his gun.

"Targ," he said, "you've made your play and I've called you. Looks to me like you've drawn to a pair of deuces."

For just a minute the cattleman hesitated. He had his faults, but foolishness was not one of them. He knew when he was whipped. "I guess I have," he said

[*Turn page*]

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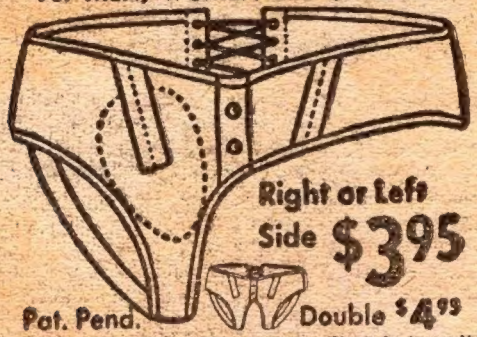

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ruefully. "Anyway, that trail would have been pure misery, a buildin'. Saves us a sight of work."

He turned away, and the hands bunched around him. All but the man with the gray mustache. His eyes twinkled.

"Looks like you'll be needin' some help, Sartain. Are you hirin'?"

"Sure!" Sartain grinned suddenly. "First thing, catch my horse. I've got me a game leg, and then take charge until I get back here!"

The boarding house triangle at the Y7 was clanging loudly when the dun cantered into the yard.

Kim dismounted stiffly and limped up the steps.

Tom Monaghan came to his feet, his eyes widened. The hands stared. Kim noted with relief that all were there. One man had a bandage around his head, another had his arm in a sling, his left arm, so he could still eat.

"Sort of wound things up," Sartain explained. "There won't be any trouble with Targ in the high meadows. Figured to drop down and have some breakfast."

Kim avoided Rusty's eyes, but ate in silence. He was on his second cup of coffee when he felt her beside him. Then, clearing a space on the table, she put down a pie, its top golden brown and bulging with the promise of fruit underneath.

He looked up quickly. "I knew you'd be back," she said simply.

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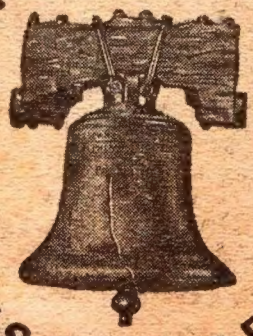

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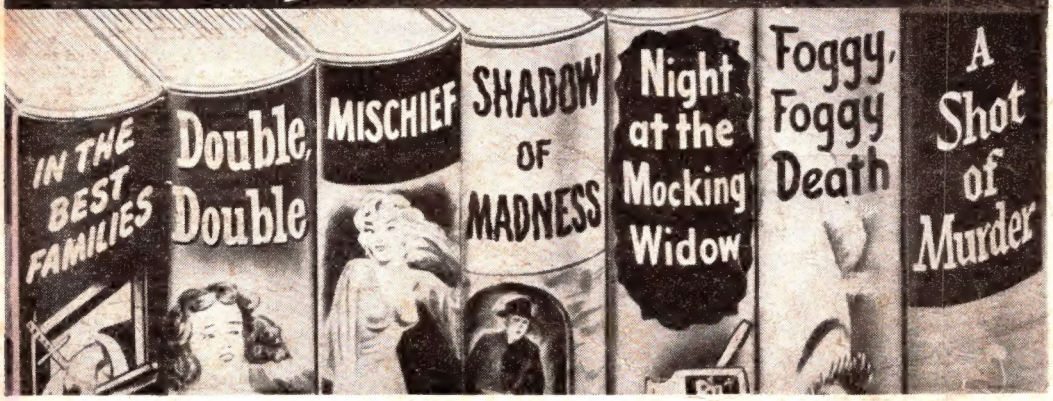

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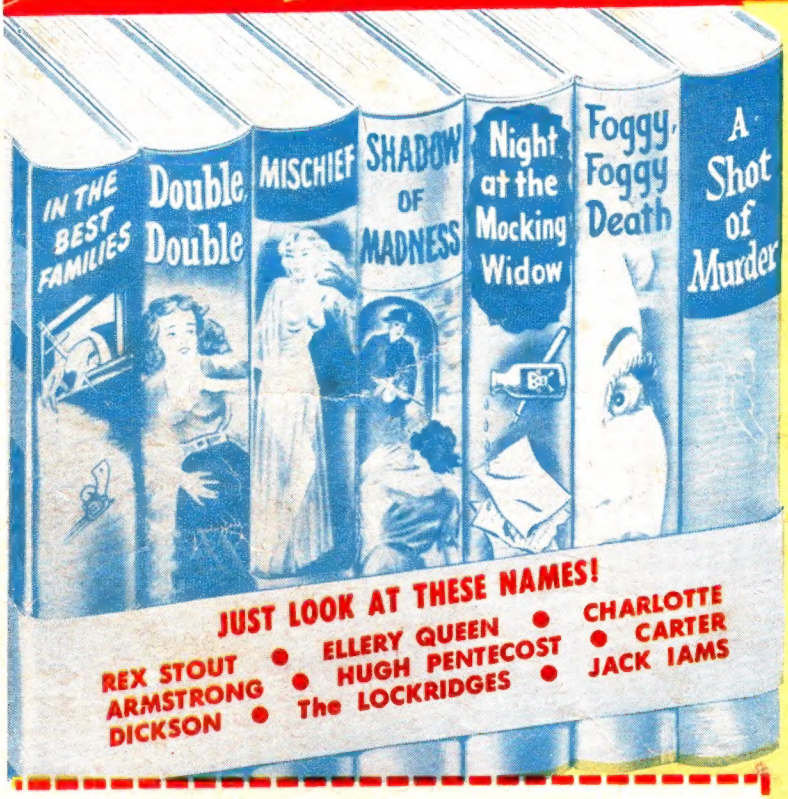

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